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By CAPT. MAYNE REID.

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THE LONE RANCH.

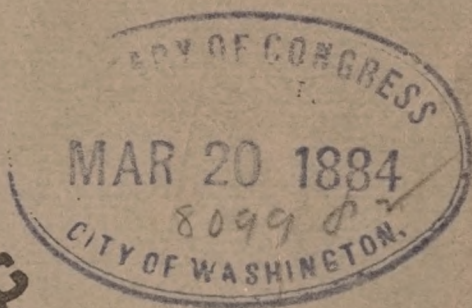
A Novel.

BY

CAPT. MAYNE REID,

AUTHOR OF

“THE SCALP-HUNTERS,” “THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN,”
“RANGERS AND REGULATORS,” “OSCEOLA, THE
SEMIMOLE,” “THE WILD HUNTRESS,”
“THE QUADROON,” ETC.



NEW YORK:

G. W. Carleton & Co., Publishers.

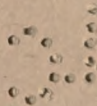
STREET & SMITH, NEW YORK WEEKLY.

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To
THE READERS OF THE
NEW YORK WEEKLY,

WHO, FOR TWENTY-FIVE YEARS, HAVE STOOD FAITHFULLY BY US,
CHEERING US IN OUR LABORS, AND BIDDING US GODSPEED;

TO WHOM OUR PET JOURNAL HAS BECOME A HOUSE-
HOLD WORD, AND WITHOUT WHOSE AID WE

COULD HAVE ACCOMPLISHED NOTH-

ING, THIS VOLUME IS RE-

SPECTFULLY DEDI-

CATED

BY THE PUBLISHERS,

STREET & SMITH.



HE CHECKED UP HIS HORSE BEFORE COMING TOO CLOSE, AND WITH THE REVOLVER TOOK AIM
AT THE NEAREST OF HIS ENEMIES, WHICH WAS ROBLEZ.—[page 385.]

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THE LONE RANCH.

CHAPTER I.

A STREET SPECTACLE.

In the city of Chihuahua—metropolis of the northern provinces of Mexico—for the most part built of mud, standing in the midst of vast, treeless plains overtopped by bald, porphyritic mountains—plains with a population sparse as the timber—lies the first scene of our story.

Less than twenty thousand souls dwell within the walls of the North Mexican metropolis; and in the country surrounding it a like limited number.

Once they were thicker on the soil; but the tomahawk of the Comanche and the spear of the Apache have thinned off the population, until country houses stand at magnificent distances apart, with more than an equal number of ruins between.

But a few years ago, a stranger entering its gates would have seen overhead, and whisked to and fro by the wind, some score of objects similar to one another, resembling

tufts or tresses of hair. It was long, trailing, and black, as if taken from the mane or tail of horses. But it came not thence, and the patches of skin that served to keep the bunches together had been *stripped from human skulls*.

They were scalps, the scalps of Indians, showing that the Comanches and Apaches had not had it all their own way. Beside them could be seen other objects, of auricle-shape, set in rows or circles, like festoons of red-peppers hung up for desiccation. No doubt they had drawn tears from the eyes of those whose heads had furnished them, for they were *human ears*.

These ghastly souvenirs were the bounty-warrants of a band whose deeds have been already chronicled by this pen. They were the trophies of the "Scalp-Hunters."

They were there less than a quarter of a century ago, waving in the dry wind that sweeps over the plains of Chihuahua. For aught the writer knows, they may be there still, or if not the same, others replacing or supplementing them, of like gory record.

It is not with the "Scalp-Hunters" we have now to do—only with the city of Chihuahua. And not much with it, either. A single scene occurring in its streets is all of Chihuahuan life depicted in our tale.

It was the spectacle of a religious procession, a thing far from uncommon in Chihuahua, or any other Mexican town; so common, indeed, that at least weekly the like may be witnessed. This was one of the grandest—representing the story of the crucifixion. Citizens of all classes

assisted at the ceremony, the soldiers, also, taking part in it. The *padres*, of course, both secular and regular, were its chief supporters and propagators.

There is, or was then, an American hotel in Chihuahua, or, at least, one approaching the American fashion. It was a mere *posada*. Among its guests was a stranger, alike to the town and country. His dress, figure, and facial appearance bespoke him an American; and, by the same tokens, it could be told that he belonged to the Southern States—at all events, those that lie west of the Alleghanies.

He was, in truth, a Kentuckian, but so far from representing the type, rough and stalwart, usually associated with the idea of "old Kentuck," he was a man of medium size, with a build comparable to that of the Belvidere Apollo. It was a figure tersely set, with limbs well knitted; a handsome face and features of amiable cast at the same time expressed confidence and courage. A costly Guayaquill hat upon his head, and coat to correspond, bespoke him respectable; his attire proclaimed him a man of leisure; his air and bearing were unmistakable; they could only belong to a gentleman.

Why he was in Chihuahua, or whence he had come to it, no one seemed to know or inquire. Enough that he was there, and gazing upon the spectacular procession as it filed past the little hotel.

He was regarding it with no eye of wonderment. In all likelihood he had seen such before. He could not

have traveled far through Mexico without witnessing some ceremony of a similar kind.

Whether interested in this one or no, he was soon notified that he was not regarding it in the manner proper, customary to the country. Standing half behind one of the pillars at the porch of the posada, he had not thought it necessary to take off his hat. Perhaps placed in a more conspicuous position he would have done this. He was not the sort of man to seek notoriety by an exhibition of bravado; and though a Protestant of the Presbyterian creed, he would have shrunk from offending the slightest sensibilities of any one belonging to an opposite faith.

That his Panama hat still remained upon his head arose, at first, from simple forgetfulness that it was there—inside the portico, and partially screened by one of its pillars, it had not occurred to him to uncover.

He now saw scowling looks, and heard low growlings from the crowd as it swayed slowly past. He knew enough to be conscious of what these meant; but he felt at the same time disinclined to humiliate himself by a too facile compliance. A proud American, in the midst of a people he had learned to despise—no wonder he should feel a little defiant and a good deal exasperated. Enough yielding he thought to withdraw back behind the pillar, which he did.

It was too late. The keen eye of a fanatic had been upon him, one who appeared to have authority for meting out chastisement. An officer, bearded and grandly be-



THE BLOW WAS STRUCK SIDEWAYS, BUT WITH SUFFICIENT FORCE TO SEND THE HAT WHIRLING
TO THE PAVEMENT, AND ITS WEARER REELING AGAINST THE WALL.—[page 13.]

dizened, riding at the head of a troop of lancers, quickly wrenched his horse from the line of march and spurred toward the porch of the posada. In another instant his bared blade was waving over the hatted head of the Kentuckian.

"*Gringo! alto el sombrero! Abaso! a sus rodillas!*" (Off with your hat, greenhorn! Down upon your knees!) were the words that came hissing from between the mustached lips of the lancer. As they failed to get compliance, they were instantly followed by a blow from the blade of the saber. It was struck sideways, but with sufficient sleight and force to send the hat whirling to the pavement, and its wearer reeling against the wall.

It was but the stagger of a sudden and little expected surprise. In another instant the Kentuckian had drawn a revolver, and in another its bullet would have been through the brain of the swaggering assassin, when a man, rushing from behind, laid hold of his arm and restrained him.

At first he thought it was the act of a second enemy; but in a moment he knew it to be the behavior of a friend—at the least a pacificator, resolved upon seeing fair play.

"You are wrong, Captain Uraga," interrupted the one who had intermeddled. "This gentleman is a stranger in the country, and not acquainted with our customs."

"A heretic, then! It is time he should be taught them, What right, Colonel Miranda, have you to interfere?"

"The right, first of humanity; second, of hospitality; and third, that I am your superior officer."

"Bah! you mistake yourself. Remember, *senor*, you are not in your own district. If it was in New Mexico, I might take commands from you. This is Chihuahua."

"Chihuahua or not, you shall be made answerable for this outrage. Don't imagine, *cavallero*, that your patron, Santa Anna, is now President of the Republic, with power to indorse such conduct as yours. You seem to forget, Captain Uruga, that you carry your commission under a new *regime*—one that holds itself responsible not only to fixed laws, but to the code of decency—responsible, also, for international courtesy to the great government of which I believe this gentleman is a citizen."

"Bah!" once more exclaimed the bedizened bully. "Preach to ears that have time to listen. I sha'n't stop the procession either for you or your Yankee *protege*."

With this the captain of lancers struck the spurs into his horse, and once more placed himself at the head of his troop. The crowd collected by this unpleasant episode soon scattered away—the sooner that the strange gentleman along with his generous defender at once disappeared from the porch by going inside the door.

The procession was still passing, and its irresistible attractions swept the listeners along in its current, most of them soon forgetting a scene that in a land where "law secures not life" is of too common occurrence to be long thought of or remembered.

CHAPTER II.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

The young Kentuckian was half-frenzied by the insult. The proud blood of his republican citizenship was boiling within his veins. What was he to do?

In the agony of his dilemma he put the question to the gentleman who had no doubt restrained him from committing manslaughter. The latter was an entire stranger to him, never seen before. He was a man of less than thirty years of age, wearing a broad-brimmed hat upon his head, a jacket, and slashed velveteen trousers, and scarf—in short, the costume of the country. Still there was a military bearing about him that corresponded to the title by which the swaggerer addressed him.

“Cavallero,” he said, in reply, “if your own safety be of any consequence to you, I should advise you to take no further notice of the matter.”

“Pardon me, senor; but not f all the world would I follow your advice—not for my life. I am an American. We do not take blows, without giving something in return. I must have redress.”

“If you seek it by the law, I may as well say that here you won’t have much chance of finding it.”

"I know that. The law—I did not think of such a thing. I am a gentleman; I suppose that Captain Uraga pretends to be the same. He cannot refuse to meet me."

"He may, and very likely would, on the plea of your being a stranger—only a rude barbarian, a *Tejano*, as he would put it."

"Oh, Heaven! What am I to do?"

"Well, cavallero, if you are determined on a duel, I think I can arrange it. I feel myself a little compromised by my meddling, as he styles it, and if you will accept of a stranger for a second, I can answer for it he will not refuse me."

"Colonel Miranda—your name, I believe—need I attempt to express my thanks for so much generosity? I cannot; I could not. You have removed the very difficulty that was troubling me, for I am not only a stranger to you, but to every one around me. I reached Chihuahua only yesterday, and do not know a soul in the place."

"Enough; you shall not be disappointed for the want of a friend. As a preliminary, may I ask if you have skill in the use of the sword?"

"Sufficient to risk my life upon it."

"I put the question because that is the weapon your adversary will be certain to choose. You being the challenger, of course he has the choice; and he will insist on it for a reason that may perhaps amuse you. It is that a Mexican gentleman believes you Americans somewhat

awkward in the handling of the sword, though we know you to be adepts in the use of the pistol. I know Captain Gil Uruga to be as thorough a poltroon as ever wore epaulettes; but he will have to meet you on my account, and he would perhaps have done so anyhow, trusting to the probability of your not being a skilled swordsman."

"In that, Colonel Miranda, he may perhaps be disappointed."

"I am glad to hear it; and now for me to receive your directions. I am ready to act."

The directions were given, and within two hours after Captain Gil Uruga of the Lancers was in receipt of a challenge from the young American, Frank Hamersley, Colonel Miranda being its bearer.

With such a voucher the swaggerer could not do otherwise than accept it; which he did with the more confidence for the very reason Miranda had made known. "A Tejano—a barbarian!" was the reflection; "what should he know of the sword?"

And swords were the weapons chosen.

Had the captain of the Mexican lancers been told that his Kentuckian adversary had spent a portion of his life among the Creoles of New Orleans, he would have had less trust in the chances likely to favor him. We need not describe the duel, which, if it differed from other encounters of the kind, it was by being on both sides bitter and of deadly intent.

Suffice it to say, that the young Kentuckian displayed

a skill in swordsmanship sufficient to disarrange several of Gil Úraga's front teeth, and make an ugly hole in his cheek. The lancer had left just enough command over his mouth to enable him to cry "enough!" and the affair was over.

* * * * *

"Senor Hamersley," said the gentleman who had so effectively befriended him, after they had returned from the encounter, and were drinking a bottle of the best wine in the hotel, "may I ask where you are going from here?"

"I intend going north—to Santa Fe, in New Mexico. Thence to the United States, along with one of the return caravans."

"When did you propose starting?"

"As to that, I am not tied to time. The party with whom I am to cross the plains will not be leaving Santa Fe for six weeks to come. I can get there by a month's travel, I suppose."

"Less than that. It is not a question of how soon you can get there, but of when you may leave here. I advise you to start at once. I admit that two days is but a short time to see the sights even of Chihuahua; but you have seen some of them—enough, I should say. If you take my advice, cavallero, you will let it content you, and kick the Chihuahua dust from your feet before another day passes over your head."

"But why, Colonel Miranda?"

"Because as long as you remain here you will be in danger of losing your life. You don't know the character of the man with whom you have crossed swords. I do. Although wearing the uniform of an officer in our army, he is simply a cut-throat and robber. He deems himself no little of a lady-killer; you have spoiled his physiognomy for life, and, depend upon it, as long as life lasts he will not be the man to forgive you. I have also come in for a share of his spite; and it behooves both of us to beware of him. Daggers can here be purchased by the score, and the arms of *assassins* to use them. Now do you understand me?"

"I do. But how do you counsel me to act?"

"As I intend doing myself—leave Chihuahua this very day. Our roads are the same as far as Albuquerque, where you will be out of reach of this little danger. I am retiring thither from the City of Mexico, where I've had business with the government. I have an escort, and if you choose to avail yourself of it, you are welcome to its protection."

That same afternoon, two hours before the going down of the sun, a party of horsemen, wearing the uniform of Mexican dragoons of the line, left Chihuahua, and took the northern road leading to Santa Fe. Colonel Miranda, his ranchero dress changed for the fatigue uniform of a cavalry officer, rode at the head, and by his side the young American he had so generously and gallantly befriended.

CHAPTER III.

THE COLONEL COMMANDANT.

Six weeks have elapsed since the day of the duel at Chihuahua. Two men are standing on the terraced roof of a large and massive dwelling-house, close to the town of Albuquerque, whose church-towers are just visible through the foliage of trees that shade and surround the dwelling.

They are Colonel Miranda and his Kentuckian friend.

The hospitality of the generous Mexican had not ceased with the termination of their journey from Chihuahua. After three weeks of toilsome travel, including the traverse of the famed "Dead Man's Journey," he was continuing to extend it in his own house and his own district—of which he was the military commandant. Albuquerque was then occupied by a considerable body of troops, stationed there for defense against Indian incursions, at the time frequent and much feared.

The house on which the two men stood was that in which Colonel Miranda had been born—the patrimonial mansion of a large estate that extended along the river, and back toward the Sierra Blanca mountains into territories almost unknown.

Besides being an officer in the Mexican army, Colonel Miranda was one of the magistrates of the county.

The house, as we have said, was a large, massive mansion, having, like all Mexican dwellings of its class, a terraced roof. What is also common enough in that country, it was surrounded by a cupola. Standing less than half a mile distant from the soldiers' barracks, the commandant found it convenient to make use of it as his headquarters. A small guard in the covered gate-entrance below, and a sentry pacing in front, indicated this.

There was no family inside, wife, woman, or child; for the colonel, still a young man, was a bachelor. Only peons in the field, grooms and other servants around the stables, with domestics in the dwelling—all, male and female, being Indians of the race known as "Pueblos," or "Mansos"—brown-skinned and obedient.

But there was no living lady to make her soft footsteps heard within the halls of Colonel Miranda's mansion. There was the portrait of a lovely girl, that hung against the wall of the main room, upon which his American guest had more than once gazed in silent admiration. It showed signs of having been recently painted; which was not strange, since it was the likeness of Colonel Miranda's sister, some years younger than himself, scarce yet a woman—at the time on a visit to some relations in a distant city of the republic.

The host and his guest upon the house-top were leisureing away the time in the indulgence of a cigar.

"And so you must go to-morrow, Senor Don Francisco?" said his host, looking inquiringly into the face of the American.

"There is no help for it, colonel. The prairie merchants with whom I came out will be leaving Santa Fe the day after to-morrow. There will be just time for me to get there. Unless along with them, there may be no opportunity for months, and you know one cannot cross the plains alone."

"Well, I suppose I must lose you. I am sorry. I am somewhat lonely here. There's not one of my officers, with the exception of our old *medico*, exactly of the sort to be companionable. But my sister will soon be here, and the brave girl has plenty of life in her, though she is but young. What a romping creature she is! wild as a mustang-filly fresh caught. I wish, Don Francisco, you could have seen Adela. I'm sure you'd be delighted with her."

If the portrait on the wall was anything of a faithful likeness, Hamersley could not have helped it. This was his reflection, though he did not in speech declare it.

"It is hoped we shall meet again, Colonel Miranda," was the simple rejoinder. "If I did not have this hope I should now be parting from you with greater regret. Indeed, I have more than a presentiment we shall meet again, for I have as good as made up my mind to return to New Mexico. I have always had a fancy for the adventurous life of the prairie-trader; and as I have sufficient

means to stock a small caravan for myself, I think now of trying it. My present trip has been one of experiment and exploration. I am satisfied with the result, and if no accident arises you may see me on the Del Norte before either of us shall be twelve months older."

"Then, indeed, is there hope of our meeting again. I am rejoiced at it. But, Senor Don Francisco," continued his host, changing to a serious tone, "a word lest I might forget it—a word of counsel, or warning I may call it. You are too unsuspicious, too regardless of danger. It does not all lie upon the prairies, or among the red-skinned savages. There is as much of it here, amid the abodes of our so-called civilization. When you are traveling through this country keep your late antagonist in mind, and should you at any time meet, *beware of him*. I have given you some hints about the character of Gil Uraga. I have not told you all. He is worse than you can ever imagine. I know him well. Do you see that ranch standing out among the suburbs—a mere hovel it is?"

Hamersley nodded assent.

"He was born there. His father was a robber, himself the same. He has left in his native place a record of crimes well known, with others still worse that we more than suspected. In short, he is, as I have told you, a robber. No doubt you wonder that such a man should be a captain of lancers. That is because you are ignorant of the state of our army—our society as well. It is but

the result of constantly recurring changes in our political system. Would you believe it, senor, that this wretch, since epaulettes have been set on his shoulders—placed there for some vile service—has had the audacity to aspire to the hand of my sister. Adela Miranda standing in bridal robes by the side of Gil Uraga! I would rather see her in her coffin!”

Hamersley's bosom swelled up under the exciting words. The young American felt an emotion almost equal to that of his host. He thought of the sweet face that must be the original of that portrait, of the beautiful and innocent expression.

He thought of the ruffian whose blow he had felt, and whose blood he had drawn. He thought of the *wolf* and the *lamb*.

“But, surely, Colonel Miranda,” he said, at length, “there could be no danger of such an event as that?”

“Never, so long as I live. But, senor, this is a strange land—a country of quick changes. I am here to-day, commandant of this district, with power, I may almost say, over the lives of all around me. To-morrow I may be a fugitive, or dead. If the latter, where is she, my poor sister, to find the hand that could or would protect her?”

Again the breast of Hamersley heaved convulsively. Strange as it might appear, the words of his friend seemed like an appeal to him.

Hamersley could not help having strange and varied

imaginings; yet among them was one thought in the shape of a determination. It was to return to Albuquerque.

"I am sure to be back here," he said, as if the promise might in some way tranquillize the apprehensions of his friend. Then changing to a more careless tone, he added: "I cannot come by the spring caravan, for there would not be time for me to make my arrangements. But I shall write you by the trains leaving the States in spring, so that you may know when to expect me. And if, Colonel Miranda," he added, after a short, reflective pause, in which his countenance took an altered and graver form of expression—"if any political trouble, such as you speak of, should occur, and you may find it necessary to flee from your own land, I need not tell you that in mine you will find a friend and a home. After what has happened here, you may depend upon the first being true; and the second, hospitable if humble."

Next morning saw Frank Hamersley riding away from the town, on the road toward the Rio Arriba.

Not alone, but with an escort of dragoons, sent to see him safe on the way.

The hospitality of the Mexican commandant went beyond the walls of his house—even beyond the limits of the district he commanded; for the escort did not leave his late guest till the latter had set foot upon the plaza of Santa Fe.

CHAPTER IV.

SURROUNDED.

A plain of pure sand—glaring red-yellow under the first rays of the rising sun—toward the east and west apparently illimitable, but interrupted northward by a chain of table-topped hills, and along its southern edge by a continuous cliff, rising wall-like to the height of several hundred feet, and trending each way beyond the verge of vision. About half distance between the prolonged escarpment and the outlying hills, six Conestoga wagons are locked tongue and tail together, inclosing a lozenge-shaped or elliptical space—a corral—inside which are fifteen men and four horses.

Only ten of the men are living, the other five are dead, their bodies lying between the wheels of the wagons. Two of the horses have succumbed to the same fate.

Outside are the dead mules, several still attached to the protruding poles, broken as their bodies fell crashing across them. Fragments of leather straps and cast gearing tell of others that have stampeded and desperately escaped from the spot. Inside and all around are traces of a struggle, the ground scored and furrowed by the hoofs of horses and the booted feet of men, with here and there

little rivulets or pools of blood. This, fast filtering into sand, shows that it had been freshly spilled, some of it yet smoking. All the signs tell of a recent conflict. And so should they, since it is still going on, or only suspended to recommence a new act of the tragedy that promises to be still more sanguinary than the one just terminated.

A tragedy easy of explanation. There is no question about why the wagons are corraled, or how the men, mules, and horses came to be killed. Distant about three hundred yards upon the sandy plain are other men and horses to the number of near two hundred. Their half-naked bodies of bronze color, fantastically marked with devices in chalk-white, charcoal-black, and vermilion-red, their buckskin breech-clouts and leggings, with plumes sticking tuft-like above their crowns, tell them to be Indians.

It is a band of roaming red men, who have attacked a caravan of whites—no new spectacle on the prairies.

They have made the first onslaught, which was intended to stampede the caravan, and at once capture it. This was done before daybreak. Foiled in the attempt, they are now laying siege to it, having surrounded it on all sides at a distance just clearing the range of the rifles of the besieged. Their line forms the circumference of a circle of which the wagon-clump is the center. It is not very regularly preserved, but ever changing, ever in motion, like some vast constrictor serpent that has thrown its body into a grand coil to close whenever ready to give the

fatal squeeze to its victim. And their victims appear to have no hope of escape, no alternative but to succumb.

That the party protected by the wagons have not "gone under" at the first onslaught of so many enemies, is significant of their character. Of a surety they are not common emigrants crossing the prairies on their way to a new home. Had they been so they could not have closed their wieldy vehicles with such speed and skill; for they had started from their night camp, and the attack had been made while the train was in motion, advantage being taken of their slow drag through the soft, yielding sand. And had they been but ordinary emigrants, they would not have stood either so promptly or so courageously on the defense, or shown such an array of dead enemies around them; for in the circle of savages outside can be seen at least a score of forms lying prostrate on the sand.

There is a suspension of hostilities. The red men, disappointed by the failure of their first charge, have retreated to a safe distance.

On one side of the circle a body of them, clumped together, holds council; others gallop around it as bearers of instructions that evidently relate to a changed plan of attack. With so much blood before their eyes, and the bodies of their slain comrades, it is not likely they will retire from the ground. In their shouts there is the ring of a resolved vengeance and a speedy renewal of the fight.

"Who do you think they are?" asked Frank Hamers-

ley, the proprietor of the assaulted caravan. "Are they Comanches, Walt?"

"Yes, Kimanch," answered the individual addressed. "An' the wust kind o' Kimanch. They're a band o' the cowardly Tenawas. I kin tell by their bows. Don't ye see that thar's two bends in 'em?"

"I do."

"Wal, that's the sort o' bow the Tenawas carry—same's the Apach. They hope to make short work of us, and I can see no chance 'cept fight it out to the bitter eend. There's no mercy in them yells—ne'er a morsel o' it."

"What do you think they intend doing next?"

"Jest yet 'tain't easy to tell. Thar's somethin' afoot among 'em—some durned Injun trick. Clar as I kin see, that big chief with the red cross on his ribs air him they call the Horned Lizard, an' ef it be, thar ain't a cunniner coon on all this contynent."

"Don't you think our best way would be to make a dash for it, and try to cut through them? If we stay here they'll starve us out. We haven't water enough in the wagons to give us a drink apiece."

"I know all that, an' have tho't of it. But ye forget about our horses. Thar's only two left alive, yours an' mine; all the rest air shot or stampeded. Thar's but two o' us would stand a chance o' getting clur, and that slim enough."

"You are right, Walt. I did not think of that. I

would not leave my men, even if assured of my own safety—never!”

“Nobody as knows you, Frank Hamersley, need be told that. Ah!” suddenly exclaimed Wilder, as he gazed toward the savages, “I knew the Horned Lizard ’ud be arter some trick. I see it now.”

“What is it?” asked several voices.

“Look where that lot’s stannin’ out yonder. Can’t ye see they’re wrappin’ somethin’ ’round the heads o’ the arrers—look like bits o’ rags.”

“I can see that.”

“Rags it air, then, sopped in spittles and powder.”

“For what purpose?”

“They’re a-goin’ to set the wagons afire.”

The men, each of whom was watching the post assigned to him, despite their danger, already extreme, saw fresh cause of alarm in the announcement.

When they now looked around them, and beheld the canvas-tilts and light timbers, dry as chips from long exposure to the hot prairie sun, the piles of dry-goods, woolen blankets, cotton and silken stuff, that had been intended for the stores of Chihuahua, some of which they had hastily pulled from their places to form protecting barricades—when they saw all this, and then the preparations the Indians were making, it is no wonder they should feel dismay when Walt Wilder cried out:

“They’re a-goin’ to set the wagons afire!”

The announcement, although carrying alarm, conveyed

no counsel. Even the guide, with a life-long experience on the prairies, knew not how they should act in this unexpected emergency. In the wagons, water there was none, at least not enough to have drowned out a conflagration such as that threatened; and, from the way the Indians were gesturing, the traders could predict that soon a shower of fiery missiles would be sent like meteors into their midst. None of them but had experience sufficient to admonish them of the mode intended. Even if they had never set foot upon a prairie, their school stories and legends of early life would have told them.

Arrows with tinder-rag wrapped round their barbs, on fire and spitting sparks or ablaze!

If any were ignorant of the missile, or the mode of dispatching it on its mischievous errand, it was not to be for long. Almost as soon as Wilder had given utterance to the warning words half a score of the Indians were seen springing to the backs of their horses, each bearing a bow, with a bunch of the prepared shafts, and, before any steps could be taken by the besieged traders, or any counsel exchanged between them, the pyrotechnic display had commenced. It was done by the savages galloping in circles around the wagon camp, their bodies concealed behind those of their horses, only a leg and arm showing, or now and then a face seen for an instant, and then quickly withdrawn. Not exactly in circles, but in a spiral ring, at each turn contracting nearer and nearer, till the true distance was attained for sending their fiery shafts.

“Stand to your guns, boys!” was the hurried command of the guide, backed by a speech of encouragement from the proprietor of the caravan.

“Two an’ two o’ ye look out together. Let one bring down the horse, t’other take care o’ the rider as he gits unkivered. Make sure afore you pull trigger, an’ don’t waste so much as the snappin’ o’ a cap. Thar goes the fust o’ the fireworks.”

As he spoke a spark was seen to shoot out from one of the galloping horses, which, rising rocket-like into the air, came in a parabolic curve toward the wagons.

It fell short some twenty yards, and lay smoking and sputtering in the sand.

“They hain’t got thar distance yit,” cried Walt Wilder; “but this child has got his—leastwise for that skunk on the black mustang. So hyar goes to rub him off o’ the list o’ fire-shooters.”

And with the last words went the crack of Wilder’s rifle.

The young prairie-merchant by his side, supposing him to have aimed only at the Indian’s horse, had raised his own gun, ready to take the rider as soon as he should be uncovered.

“No need, Frank,” said the guide, restraining him. “This child don’t waste two charges o’ powder that way. Keep your bullet for the karkidge o’ the next as comes ’ithin range. Look yonder! I know’d I’d fetched him



“THEY HAIN’T GOT THAR DISTANCE YIT, BUT THIS CHILD HAS GOT HIS. SO HYAR GOES TO RUB HIM OFF O’ THE LIST O’ FIRE-SHOOTERS,” CRIED WALT WILDER.—[page 32.]

out o' his stirrups, tight as he's tried to cling to 'em. Thar he goes to grass."

Hamersley, as also the others on the same side of the corral with Wilder, thought that the shot had been a miss, for the Indian at whom he had aimed still stuck to his horse, and was carried for some distance on in the curving career. Nor did the animal show any signs of having been hit. But the rider was. While engaged in the effort of sending his arrow, the savage had exposed his face, one arm, and part of the other, and, ere he could withdraw them, the bullet had struck him on the arm that supported him, breaking the bone close to the elbow-joint. He had clung on with the tenacity of a shot squirrel, knowing that to let go would be as good as death to him. But, despite all his efforts, the crippled arm failed to sustain him; and, with a despairing cry, he at length dropped to the ground. Before he could get to his feet his body was bored by a bullet from one of the men watching on that side, laying him out lifeless upon the sand.

The fall of their comrade taught the other freebooters a lesson, and for a time they made their approach with more caution. But the shouts of those standing spectators in the outer circle stimulated them to fresh efforts, as the slightest show of cowardice would have caused them to be taunted.

They closed nearer and nearer, till their arrows, one after another, went hurtling through the air, and dropped like a continuous shower of spent rocket-sticks upon the

tilts of the wagons. Several savages fell under the bullets from the barricade, but their places were supplied by fresh volunteers from the outside circle, and the sparkling shower was kept up till a curl of smoke was seen soaring from the white tilts of the wagons; not one, but half a dozen of them, and on different sides of the corral.

"*We're on fire!*" cried Walt Wilder, looking above and around. "On fire everywhere!"

"Great Heaven, yes! What are we to do?" asked several voices, despairingly.

"What are we to do?" shouted the guide, in response. "What *kin* we do but fight it out to the death, an' then die. So, boys, let us die, not like dogs, but as men—as *Americans!*"

CHAPTER V.

KNIFE, PISTOL, AND HATCHET.

The brave words had scarcely passed from Walt Wilder's lips, when the wagons became enveloped in smoke. From all sides the cloud rolled into the corral, and the men could no longer see each other.

Still through the obscurity rang their cries of mutual encouragement, repeating the determination so tersely expressed.

There was no water by which to extinguish the fast-threatening flames; yet in that moment of emergency they thought of an expedient. There were shovels in the wagons, and laying hold of these, they commenced flinging sand over the spots that had caught fire, with the intent to smother the incipient blaze. Left alone and with time they would have succeeded; but they were not left alone, for the savages, seeing the advantage they had gained, were now fast closing up for a final charge upon the corral, and the implements of industry had to be abandoned.

They were thrown despairingly aside; and the men, once more grasping their rifles, sprang back into the wagons, each with eager eye to search for an assailant.

Though themselves half-blinded by the smoke, they could still see the enemy outside, for the Indians, grown confident by the success of their expedient, were now riding recklessly nearer. Quick came the reports of rifles—faster and more frequent than ever, fast as ten men, all practiced marksmen, could load and fire. In less than sixty seconds nearly a score of savages dropped down from their horses, pierced by the fatal bullet, till the plain appeared strewn with dead bodies.

But the crisis had come—the time for a general charge of the whole band; and now the dusky outside ring was seen gradually contracting toward the wagons—the warriors advancing from all sides, some on foot, others on horseback, each eager to secure the trophy of a scalp. On they came, with wild, vengeful gestures, with wilder and more vengeful yells.

To the besieged it was the moment of despair. The wagons were on fire all around them. In some places flames were beginning to flicker up through the smoke. They no longer attempted to extinguish them. They saw it would be idle.

Did they think of surrender? No; not a man of them. That would have been equally idle. In the voices of the advancing foe there was not one tone—one accent of mercy.

Surrender, and be slain afterward! Before death to be tortured, perhaps dragged at a horse's tail, or set up as a target for the Comanche sharpshooters to practice at! No!

They would have to die anyhow. Better now than then. They were not the men to offer both cheeks to the insulter. They could resign sweet life, sweeter with the corpses of Indians lying thick around them. They would first make a hetacomb of their hated foes, and then fall upon it. That is the sort of death preferred by the prairie-man, hunter, trapper, or trader—glorious to him as the cannon-furrowed field to the soldier. That is the sort of death of which Walt Wilder spoke when he said :

“Let us die, not like dogs, but as men—as Americans.”

By this time the smoke had completely shrouded the wagons, the inclosed space between, and a fringe of some depth around them. But a still darker ring was around all—the circle of savage horsemen, who from all sides had galloped up and dismounted, to make surer work of the slaughter. The warriors jostled one another as they pressed forward afoot, each thirsting for a trophy—a scalp!

The last throes of the conflict had come. It was no longer to be a duel at a distance—no more a contest between rifle-bullets and barbed arrows; but the close, desperate, hand-to-hand conflict of pistol and knife, spear, war-club, and hatchet.

The ten white men—all yet unhurt—knew well what was before them. Not one of them blanched, or talked of backing. They did not even think of surrender.

It would have been too late to sue for mercy, had they been so inclined; but they were not. Attacked without provocation, and treacherously, as they had been, their

fury was stronger than their fear, and anger now nerved them to a frenzied energy of action

The Indians were no longer advancing upon them. They were already close around the wagons, clustering upon the wheels, or, like snakes, wriggling through the spaces left undefended. Rifles had ceased to ring, but pistols cracked—repeating-pistols, that dealt death at every shot, sending redskin after redskin to the happy hunting-grounds. And by the pistol's flash, blades were seen gleaming through the smoke, now bright, but soon dimmed and dripping blood.

For every white man that fell, at least three Indians dropped dead upon the sand. The unequal contest could not long continue—nor did it. Scarcely ten minutes did it last, and but for the obscuring smoke, five would have finished it. This was in favor of the assailed, enabling them to act with advantage against the assailants. Such a quick, wholesale slaughter did the white men make with their repeating-pistols, that the savages, surprised and staggered by it, for a moment recoiled, and appeared as if again going to retreat.

They did not—they dared not. Their superior numbers, the shame of being defeated by such a handful of foes, the glory of conquest, and added to it angry vengeance now hot in their hearts—all urged them on, and the attack was renewed with greater earnestness than ever.

Throughout every scene in the strife, Frank Hamersley had comported himself with a courage that made his men

feel less fear of death, and less regret to die by his side. Fighting like a lion, and shouting encouragement to his comrades, he had been here, there, and everywhere. He had done his full share of killing.

It was all in vain. Though standing in the midst of thick smoke, unseeing and unseen, he knew that most of his faithful men had fallen. He was admonished of this by the less frequent responses to the cries of encouragement, that told him the struggle was close upon its termination. No wonder his fury was fast giving place to despair. But it was no craven fear, nor any thought of escape. The determination not to be taken alive was strong as ever in him.

His hand still firmly clasped the bowie-knife, its blade dripping with the blood of more than one enemy, for into the body of more than one savage had he plunged it. He clutched it with the determination still further to kill—to take yet another life before his own. It was hopeless, useless slaughtering; but it was sweet. He was insane with anger, and thought it sweet.

Three dusky antagonists lay dead at his feet, and he was rushing through the corral in search of a fourth.

A giant form loomed up before him, looking more gigantic from the magnifying effect of the smoke.

It was not that of a savage. It was Walt Wilder.

“Dead beat!” hoarsely and hurriedly shouted the guide. “We must go under, Frank. We’re bound to go under, if we don’t——”

“Don’t what, Walt!”

“Git away from hyar.”

“Impossible!”

“No. Thar’s still a chance, I think—for us two, anyways. Thar ain’t many o’ the others left, an’ ef thar was, we can’t do ’em any good now by stayin’. Our stayin’ ’ud be no use to them—no use dyin’ along wi’ ’em; an’ ef we git clur, we’ll revenge ’em. Don’t ye see our horses are still safe. Thar they air, cowerin’ clost in agin one o’ the waguns. Tain’t much chance, I admit; still thar’s a shadder. Come on; let’s try it.”

Hamersley hesitated. It was the thought of deserting even the last of his faithful followers, who had sacrificed, or were still sacrificing, their lives in his service. But as the guide had truly said, what good could he do them by staying to be killed, while he might survive to avenge them. This last thought would have decided him. But Wilder had not waited for the determination. While speaking the urgent words, he had laid his huge hand upon Hamersley’s shoulder, and half led, half dragged him toward the horses.

“Keep hold o’ yur rifle, though it be empty,” hurriedly counseled the guide. “If we shed git away, it will be needed. We mout as well go under hyar as be on the puraira ’ithout a gun. Now mount.”

Almost mechanically the young Kentuckian climbed upon the back of the horse nearest him—his own. The guide had not yet mounted his, and Hamersley saw

through the smoke that he was leaning against the wheel of one of the wagons. In an instant after he perceived that the vehicle was in motion, and he could hear a slight grating noise as the tire turned in the sand. The great wagon with its load had yielded to the strength of the colossus.

In another instant a horseman was by his side, who muttered in his ear:

“Now, Frank, I’ve opened a crack atween the two. Let’s cut out through it. We can keep in the kiver o’ the smoke as fur as it’ll screen us. You foller, and see that ye don’t lose sight o’ me. If we must go under in the end, let it be out on the open plain, an’ not shet up hyar like badgers in a barrel. Follow me clost, Frank. Now or niver!”

Almost mechanically Hamersley yielded obedience, and in ten seconds after the two horsemen had cleared the wagon-clump, with the shouting crowd that encircled it, and were going at full gallop across the plain.

CHAPTER VI.

THROUGH THE SMOKE.

In making their bold dash, Walt Wilder was not acting without a plan. He had one preconceived. The smoke, with its covering cloud, might be the means of concealment and salvation. At all events, it might cover their retreat long enough to give them a start of the pursuers, and then the speed of their horses could possibly be depended upon for the rest.

They followed this plan, but unfortunately soon found that the smoke was not drifting in the right direction. The breeze carried it almost direct toward the line of escarpment, while their only chance would be to strike for the open plain.

At the cliff their flight would be stopped, for there appeared to be no passage for either man or horse. So far the smoke had favored them. Thick and stifling in the immediate vicinity of the wagons, it had enabled them to slip unperceived through the line of savages. Many of these, still mounted, had seen them pass outward, but through the blue film had mistaken them for two of their own men. Perhaps knew nothing of the animals in the back of the herd did not expect to see any of their people had not set out to escape on horseback ; besides,

they were now busy endeavoring to extinguish the fires in the wagons, all resistance being at an end.

As yet there was no sign of pursuit, and the fugitives kept on, still with the protecting smoke-cloud around them.

In the soft sand their horses' hoofs made no trampling noise, and they rode on toward the cliff, silent as specters.

On reaching the rocks, it became necessary for them either to change the direction of their flight or bring it to a termination. The red sandstone cliff towered vertically before them, like a wall of rude mason-work. A cat could not have scaled it, much less horse or man.

Already the smoke was fast thinning around them, the Indians having nearly extinguished the fires in order to save the treasure—which had no doubt been the object for their attacking the caravan.

Delay would only add to their danger, and with this thought urging them on, they wheeled their horses to the left and headed them along the line of the bluff.

Six seconds after and they were riding in a pure atmosphere, under a clear, dazzling sunlight.

But it gave them no joy. A yell from the wagons told them they were seen, and simultaneous with the shout, they saw a score of savage horsemen spurring at full speed toward them.

They were both splendidly mounted, and might still have had a fair chance of escape; but now another sight met their eyes that once more drove them to despair.

A promontory of the cliff, stretching far out into the sandy plain, lay directly in their track. Its point was nearer to their pursuers than to them. Before they could reach and turn it their retreat would be intercepted.

They might escape in the opposite direction.

Again suddenly turning, they galloped back as they had come, again entered the belt of smoke, and riding in through it, reached the clear sunlight beyond.

Again a torturing disappointment. Another promontory—twin to the first—juttied out to obstruct them.

There was no mystery in the matter. They saw the mistake they had made. In escaping under cover of the smoke they had gone too far, having ridden into a deep enlargement of the cliff.

Their pursuers, who had turned promptly as they, again had the advantage. The projecting point was nearer to them, and they would be almost sure to arrive at it first.

For the fugitives there appeared no alternative but to ride on and take their chances of hewing their way through the savage host.

“Git yur knife ready, Frank!” shouted Wilder, as he dug his spurs into his horse, and put the animal to his full speed. “Let’s keep close thegither—livin’ or dead, let’s keep close thegither.”

Their steeds needing no urging. To an American horse accustomed to the prairie, there is no spur like the yell of an Indian, for he knows that along with it usually comes the shock of a bullet or the sting of a barbed shaft.

Both bounded off together, and went over the soft sand, silent, but swift as the wind. All in vain.

Before they had half reached the projecting point, the savages were clustering around it, and with spears couched, bows bent, and clubs brandished, stood ready to receive them.

It was a gantlet that Simon Girty might despair of being able to run.

Truly seemed their retreat now cut off; and surely did death appear to be staring them in the face.

So thought the young prairie-merchant, as he turned despairingly toward his companion.

With a quick, searching glance Wilder ran his eye along the base of the cliff. The rock of red sand-stone rose rugged and frowning full five hundred feet overhead. To the superficial glance it seemed to forbid all chance either of being scaled or giving concealment. There was not even a boulder below behind which they could find shelter from the shafts of the pursuers. For all that, Wilder continued to scan it, as if it suggested some old recollection.

"It must be the place," he muttered. "It is, by the Eternal!" he added, more emphatically, once more wrenching his horse around, and crying out to his companion to follow him.

Hamersley obeyed, and rode off without knowing what next. But in another instant he divined the intent of this sudden change in the tactics of his fellow fugitive. There was an opening in the escarpment!

It was a mere crack or chine, scarce so wide as a doorway, and barely large enough to admit a man on horseback. Vertically it traversed to the top of the cliff, splitting it from base to summit.

“From your horse!” cried Wilder, as he pulled up before it, at the same time flinging himself off his own. “Drop the bridle and leave him behind. One o’ them’ll be enough for what I want, and let it be myen. Poor critter! It’s a pity, too; but it can’t be helped. We must have some kiver to screen us. Quick, Frank—quick! or they’ll be on us.”

Painful as it was to abandon his brave steed, Hamersley did as directed without well knowing why. The last speeches of the guide were somewhat enigmatical, but he knew they must have some meaning.

“Now, up into the kanyon without losing a second. Hyar, take my rifle an’ load both o’ ’em, whiles I tend to the closin’ o’ the gap.”

Seizing both guns in his grasp, Hamersley sprang into the crack, stopping when he had got well inside the jaws. Wilder followed, leading his horse by the bridle. There was a stone lying across the aperture, over which the horse had to straddle. It was above two feet in height, and when he had got his fore legs over it Wilder held him at a stand. Though hitherto following with meek obedience, the horse trembled, and showed an inclination to shy back. There was an expression in his owner’s eye he had never

seen there before—something that frightened him. But he could not now escape.

With his ribs close pressing the rocks on either side, he could not rear around, and a firm hold in front hindered him from backing.

Hamersley, busily engaged in loading the rifles, nevertheless found time to glance at Wilder's doings, wondering what he was about.

"It's a pity!" again exclaimed the guide, repeating the same words, and in the same tone of commiseration; "but it must be done. If thar war a rock big enough, or a log or anythin'. But thar ain't ne'er a thing—no other chance to make kiver. So hyar goes for a bit o' butcherin'!"

As the guide thus delivered himself, Hamersley saw him pluck the bowie-knife from his belt, its blade black-red with human gore. In another instant its edge was drawn across the throat of the horse, leaving a gash behind from which the blood gushed forth in a thick, strong stream, like water from the spout of a pump. The animal made a desperate effort to back; but with his head dragged down to his fore legs over the rock, he was unable to stir from the spot. After a convulsive throe or two, he sank down till his belly touched the stone underneath. In this attitude he ended his life, his head after a time sinking down, his eyes apparently turned with a last reproachful look upon the master who had *murdered* him.

"It hed to be done; thar war no help for it," said Walt

Wikler, as he hurriedly turned toward his companion.

“Have you got the guns charged?”

Hamersley made answer by handing to the guide his own gun. It was loaded and ready.

“Durn the blood-thirsty cowarts!” he exclaimed, grasping it, and then facing toward the plains. “I don’t know how it may all eend, but that’ll keep ’em off a while anyhow.”

As he spoke he threw himself behind the body of his slaughtered steed. That, sustained in an upright position between the counterpart walls, formed a safe barricade against the bullets and arrows of the Indians, who now, riding straight toward the spot, made the rocks resound with exclamations of surprise—shouts that spoke of a delayed, perhaps defeated, vengeance.

They took care, however, not to come within range of that long, steel-gray tube, which, turning like a telescope on a pivot, commanded a semicircle of at least a hundred yards radius around the opening in the cliff.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PURSUERS AT BAY.

Despite all the earnestness of their vengeful anger, the savage pursuers were now fairly at bay, and for a time could be kept so.

Hamersley looked upon it as being but a respite, a mere temporary deliverance from danger, yet to terminate in death. They had got into a crevice of rock, where, to all appearance, they could defend themselves as long as their ammunition lasted, or they could withstand the assaults of thirst or the cravings of hunger. How were they to get out again? As well might they have been besieged in a cave with no chance of sortie or escape.

These thoughts he communicated to his companion as soon as they found time to talk.

"Hunger an' thirst hain't nothin' to do wi' it," was Wilder's response. "We ain't a-goin' to stay hyar, not twenty minutes, if this child kin manage it, as he intends to do. Ye don't s'pose I rushed into this hyar hole like a chased rabbit? No, Frank, I've hern of the place afore from some fellers as, like ourselves, took refuge in it from a band of pursuing Kimanch. Thar's a way leads out at the back, an' jess as soon as we kin throw dust in the eyes o' these yellin' varmints in front, we'll put straight for it.

I don't know what sort o' a passage thar is—up the rocks by some kind o' a ravine. We must do our best to find it."

"But how do you intend to keep them from following you? You speak of throwing dust in their eyes. How, Walt?"

"You wait, watch, an' see. You won't hev yur patience terrifically tried, for thar ain't much time to spare about it. Thar's another passage up the cliffs, not far off. Not a doubt but these Injuns know it; an' ef we don't make haste they'll git up thar, an' come in upon us by the back door, which that won't do, no how somedever. You keep yourself in readiness, an' watch what I'm a-goin to do. When you see me scoot up backwards, foller without sayin' a word."

Hamersley promised compliance, and the guide, still kneeling behind the barricade he had so cruelly constructed, commenced a series of maneuvers that held his companion in speechless conjecture.

He first placed his gun in such a position that the barrel rested across the hips of the dead horse projected beyond the tail. In this position he made it fast by tying the butt with a piece of string to a projecting part of the saddle. He next took the cap from his head—a coonskin it was—and set it so that its upper edge could be seen alongside the pommel, and rising about three inches above the croup. The ruse was an old one, with some new additions and embellishments.

"It's all done now," said Wilder, turning away from the carcass, and crouching back to where his comrade awaited him. "Come on, Frank. If they don't diskiver the trick till we've got time to climb up the clift, then thar's still a chance for us. Come on, an' keep clost arter me."

Frank followed without saying a word. He was confident that his guide, well known and long trusted, had a reason for everything he did. It was not the time to question him, or discuss the prudence of the step he was taking. There might be danger before, but there was death—sure death behind them.

In less than a dozen paces from its entrance the cleft opened into a wider space, again closing like a pair of callipers. It was a hollow of elliptical shape, that of an old-fashioned butter-boat, scooped out of the solid rock, on all sides precipitous, except at the upper end. Here a ravine, sloping down from the summit level above, would, to the geologist, at once proclaim the secret of its formation. Not so easily explained might seem the narrow outlet to the open plain. But one skilled in the geology of the sandstone would there detect certain ferrugineous veins that, refusing to yield to the erosion of the running stream, had stood for countless ages.

Neither Walt Wilder nor the young Kentuckian gave thought to such scientific speculations, as they retreated through the narrow gap, and back into the wider gorge. All they knew, or cared for, was that a gully at the oppo-

site end was seen to slope upward, promising a path to the plain above.

In sixty seconds after they were in it, toiling onward and upward amid a chaos of rocks, where no horse could follow—loose boulders that looked as if hurled down from heaven above, or belched from earth, underneath.

The retreat of the fugitives up the ravine, like their dash out of the inclosed corral, was still but a doubtful effort. Neither of them had full confidence in being able eventually to escape. It was like the wounded squirrel clutching at the last tiny twig of a tree, however unable to support it. They were not quite certain that the sloping gorge would give them a path to the upper plain, for Wilder had only a doubtful recollection of what some trapper had told him. But even if it did, the Indians, expert climbers as they were, would soon be after them, close upon their heels. The ruse could not remain long undetected.

They rushed up the rock-strewn ravine, now gliding along ledges, squeezing their bodies between the great boulders, springing from one to the other, in the audacity of their bounds rivaling a brace of big horns.

They had got more than half-way up, when the cries of the Indians came pealing up the glen behind them. The shouts of the pursuers caused them to increase their efforts, and they hastened on.

All at once they were brought to a stop, though not by anything that obstructed their path.

On the contrary, it only seemed easier, for there were now *two* ways open to them instead of one, the ravine at this point forking into two distinct chasms. There was a choice of which to take, and it was this that caused them to stop, at the same time creating embarrassment.

The pause, however, was but for a brief space of time, only long enough to make a hasty reconnoissance. In the promise of an easy ascent there seemed but little difference between the two paths, and the guide soon came to a determination.

"It's a toss up atween 'em," he said; "but let's take the one to the right. It looks a leetle the likest."

Of course, his fellow-fugitive did not dissent, and they struck into the right-hand ravine, but not until Walt Wilder had plucked the red kerchief from his head and flung it as far as he could up the left one, where it was left lying in a conspicuous position among the rocks.

He did not say why he had thus strangely abandoned the remnant of his head-gear; but his companion, sufficiently experienced in the ways and wiles of prairie life, stood in no need of an explanation.

The track they had now taken was of comparatively easy ascent, and it was this, perhaps, that had tempted Wilder to take it. But, like most things, both in the moral and physical world, its easiness proved a delusion. They had not gone twenty paces farther up, when the sloping chasm terminated. It opened upon a little platform, covered

with large loose stones that there rested after having fallen from the cliff above.

But at a single glance they saw that the cliff could not be scaled.

They had entered into a trap, out of which there was now no chance of escape or retreat without throwing themselves back upon the breasts of their pursuers.

The Indians were already ascending the main ravine. By their voices it could be told that they had reached the point where it divided, for there was a momentary suspension of their cries, as with the baying of hounds thrown suddenly off the scent.

It would not likely be for long. They must first follow up the chasm where the kerchief had been cast; but, should that also prove to be without an outlet at the rear, they would return and try the other.

The fugitives saw that it was too late to retrace their steps.

They sprang together upon the platform, and commenced searching among the loose rocks, in hopes of gaining some place of concealment.

All at once an exclamation from the guide called his companion to his side. It was accompanied by a gesture, and followed by the words, low muttered:

“Look hyar, Frank! look at this hole! Darnation! let's get into it?”

As Hamersley came close he perceived a dark aperture among the stones to which Wilder was pointing. It

opened vertically downward, and was of an irregular, roundish shape, somewhat resembling the mouth of a well, half coped over with slabs.

Dare they enter it? Could they? What depth was it?

Wilder took up a pebble and flung it down. They could hear it descending, not at a single drop, but striking and ricochetting from side to side.

It was long before it reached the bottom and lay silent. No matter for that. The noise made in its descent told them of projecting points or ledges that might give them a foothold.

They lost not a moment of time, but commenced letting themselves down into the funnel-shaped shaft, the guide going first.

Slowly and silently they went down, like ghosts through the stage of a theater, soon disappearing in the gloom below, and leaving upon the rock-strewn platform no trace to show that human feet had ever trodden it.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN DARKNESS.

Fortunately for the fugitives, the cavern into which they had crept was a shaft of but slight diameter; otherwise they could not have gone down without dropping far enough to cause death, for the echoes from the pebble spoke of a vast depth.

As it was, the vertical void proved to be somewhat like that of a stone-built chimney, with here and there a stone left projecting. It was so narrow, moreover, that they were able to use both hands and knees in the descent, and by this means accomplished it.

They went but slowly, and required to proceed with caution. They knew that a false step, the slipping of a foot or hand, or the breaking of a fragment that gave hold to their hands, would precipitate them to an unknown depth. They did not go farther than was deemed necessary to serve for concealment. There was noise made in their descent, and they knew the Indians would soon be above, and might hear them. Their only hope lay in their pursuers believing them to have gone by the left-hand chasm and the plain above. In all likelihood the Indians would explore both branches of the ravine, and if the

cunning savages should suspect their presence in the shaft, there would be no hope for them. These thoughts decided them to come to a stop as soon as they could find foothold. About thirty feet from the surface they found this, on a point of rock or ledge that jutted horizontally across the shaft. It was broad enough to give both fair standing-room, and they were now in intense darkness.

It was not long before they saw that which justified their caution—the plumed head of a savage, with his neck craned over the edge of the aperture, and seen conspicuously against the blue sky above. And soon half a dozen similar figures beside it; while they could hear distinctly the talk that was passing between them.

Wilder had some knowledge of the Comanche tongue, and could make out most of what was being said. Amid exclamations that spoke of vengeance, there were words in a calmer tone—discussion, inquiry, and conjecture.

From these it could be understood that the pursuers had separated into two parties—one following on the false track, by the path which the guide had baited for them; the other coming direct up by the right and true one.

There were bitter exclamations of disappointment, and threats of an implacable vengeance; and the fugitives, as they listened, might have reflected how fortunate they had been in finding that unfathomed hole. But for it they would already have been in the clutches of a cruel enemy.

However, they had little time for reflection. The talk

overhead at first expressed doubts as to their having descended the shaft; but doubts readily to be set at rest.

The eyes of the Indians having failed to inform them, their heads were withdrawn, and soon after a stone came tumbling down the chimney.

Something of this kind the guide had predicted, for he flattened himself against the wall behind, and stood as "small" as his colossal frame would permit, having cautioned his companion to do the same.

The stone passed without striking them, and went crashing on till it lay on the bottom below.

Another followed, and another, the third striking Hamersley on the breast and tearing a couple of buttons from his coat.

This was shaving close—too close to be comfortable. Perhaps the next boulder might rebound from the wall above, and strike one or both of them dead.

In fear of this result, they commenced groping to find whether the ledge offered any better screen from the dangerous shower that promised to rain for some time longer upon them.

Good! Hamersley got his hand into a hole that opened horizontally, and proved big enough to admit his body, as also the larger frame of his companion. Both were soon inside it. It was a sort of grotto they had discovered, and, squatted inside it, they could laugh to scorn the storm that still came rattling from above, the stones hiss-

ing and hurtling like aerolites as they passed close to their faces.

The rocky rain at length ended. The Indians had suddenly come to the conclusion that it was either barren in results, or must have effectually performed the purpose intended by it, and for a short while there was silence above and below.

They who were hidden in the shaft might have supposed that their persecutors, satisfied at what they had accomplished, were retiring, or had retired, from the spot.

Hamersley did think so ; but the old prairie-man, more skilled in the Indian character, could not console himself with such a fancy.

“Ne’er a bit o’ it,” he whisperingly said to his companion. “They ain’t a-goin’ to leave us that eezy—not if Horned Lizard be amongst ’em. They’ll either stay there till we climb out agin, or try to smoke us out. Ye may take my word for it, Frank, thar’s some’at to come of it. Look up! Didn’t I tell ye so?”

Wilder drew back out of the narrow aperture, through which he had been craning his neck and shoulders to get a view of what was passing above.

The hole leading into the grotto that held them was barely large enough to admit the body of a man. Hamersley took his place, and turning his eyes upward, at once saw what his comrade referred to. It was the smoke of a fire that appeared in the act of being kindled near the edge of the aperture above. The smoke was ascending toward

the sky diagonally, drifting across the blue disk outline by the rim of the rocks.

He had barely time to make the observation, when a swishing sound admonished him to draw back his head, and there passed before his face a mass of falling stalks and fagots, in which sparks and flame were commingled. Some of this settled upon the ledge, the rest sweeping on to the bottom of the abyss.

In a moment after the shaft was filled with smoke, but not that of an ordinary wood fire. Even this would have been sufficient to stifle them where they were; but the fumes now entering their nostrils were of a kind to cause suffocation almost instantaneously.

The fagots set on fire were the stalks of the creosote plant—the *ideodondo* of the Mexican table-lands, well known for its power to cause asphyxia. Walt Wilder recognized it at the first whiff.

“It’s the stink-weed!” he exclaimed. “That darned stink-weed o’ New Mexico. It’ll kill us if we can’t keep it out. Off wi’ yer coat, Frank. It air bigger than my hunting-shirt. Let’s spread it acrost the hole, and see if that’ll do.”

His companion obeyed with alacrity, stripping off his coat as quickly as the limited space would permit. Fortunately, it was a garment of the sack specialty, without any split in the tail, and when extended offered a good breadth of surface. It proved sufficient for the purpose, and before the little grotto had become so filled with

smoke as to be absolutely untenable, its entrance was closed by a curtain of broadcloth.

For nearly half an hour they kept the coat spread, holding it close around the edges of the aperture with heads, hands, knees, and elbows.

Withal some of the bitter smoke found ingress, torturing their eyes and half stifling them.

They bore it with philosophic fortitude and in profound silence, using their utmost efforts to prevent sneezing or coughing.

From what Wilder had heard, their persecutors were in doubt about their having descended into the shaft, and this uncertainty promised to be their salvation. Unless sure that they were taking all this trouble to some purpose, the redmen would not dally long over their work. Besides, there was rich booty to be distributed from the captured wagons, which would attract the Indians back to them, each having an interest in being present at the distribution.

Thus reasoned Walt Wilder as they listened to detect a change in the performance, making use of all their ears.

Of course they could see nothing, no more than if they had been immured in the darkest cell of an inquisitorial dungeon. Only by their ears might they make any guess at what was going on. These admonished them that more of the burning brush was being heaved into the hole. Every now and then they could hear it as it went swishing

past the door of their curtained chamber, the stalks and sticks rasping against the rocks in their descent.

After a time these sounds ceased to be heard, the Indians no doubt thinking that sufficient of the inflammable matter had been cast in to cause their complete destruction. If inside the cavern they must by this time be stifled—dead.

So must have reasoned the red-skinned fumigators, for after awhile they desisted from their brutal task.

But as if to make assurance doubly sure before taking their departure from the spot they performed another act of equally merciless intent. During the short period of silence their victims could not guess what they were about. They only knew by occasional sounds reaching them from above that there was some change in the performance, but what it was they could not even shape a conjecture. The silence at length ended with a loud, rumbling noise, that was itself suddenly terminated in a grand crash, as if a portion of the impending cliff had become detached and fallen down upon the platform.

Then succeeded a silence, unbroken by the slightest sound. No longer was heard either noise or a voice, not the murmur of one.

It was a silence that resembled death—as if the vindictive savages had one and all met a deserved doom by being crushed under the cliff.

For some time after hearing this mysterious noise, which had caused the rocks to tremble around them, the two

men remained motionless within their place of concealment. At length Wilder cautiously and deliberately pushed aside the curtain. At first only a small portion of it—a corner, so as to make sure about the smoke. It still oozed, but not voluminously as at first. It had evidently become attenuated, and was growing thinner. It appeared also to be ascending with rapidity, as up the funnel of a chimney having a good draught. For this reason it was carried past the mouth of the grotto without much of it drifting in, and they saw that they could now safely withdraw the curtain.

It was a welcome relaxation from the irksome task that had been so long imposed upon them, and the coat was at once permitted to drop down upon the ledge.

Although there were no longer any sounds heard, or other signs to indicate the presence of the Indians, the fugitives did not feel sure of their having gone, and it was some time before they made an attempt to re-ascend the shaft.

At length, however, perceiving that the tranquillity continued, they no longer deemed it rash to risk a reconnaissance, and for this purpose Walt Wilder crawled out upon the ledge and looked upward. A feeling of surprise, mingled with apprehension, at once seized upon him.

“Kin it be night?” he asked, whispering the words back into the grotto.

“Not yet, I should think,” answered Hamersley. “The

fight was begun before daybreak. The day can't all have passed yet. But why do you ask, Walt?"

"Because thar's no light comin' from above. Whar's the bit o' blue sky we seed? Thar ain't the breadth o' a hand visible. It can't be the smoke as hides it. That seems most clared off. Durned ef I kin see a bit o' the sky! 'Bove us, below, everything as black as the ten o' spades. What the duse kin it mean?"

Without waiting for a reply, or staying for his companion to come out upon the ledge, the guide rose to his feet, and grasping the projecting points above his head, commenced ascending the shaft in a similar manner to that by which he had made the descent.

Hamersley, who by this time had crept out of the cavity, stood upon the ledge, listening.

He could hear his comrade as he scrambled up, his feet rasping the rocks, and his hard breathing.

At length Walt appeared to have reached the top, when Hamersley heard words that caused a thrill of horror to pass through his frame.

"Oh, Heaven!" cried the guide, in his surprise forgetting to subdue the tone of his voice; "they've built us up. Thar's a stone over the mouth o' the hole, shettin, it like a pot-lid. A stone—a rock that no mortal could move. Frank Hamersley, it's all over wi' us! *We're buried alive!*"

CHAPTER IX.

A SAVAGE JOLLIFICATION.

The sanguinary strife ended with the capture of the caravan. When the smoke of the extinguished fires drifted aside, and the sunlight once more fell free upon the wagons, a horrible picture was presented.

Within the corral lay the bodies of thirteen white men, their heads without hair, and the crown of each showing a surface of crimson color. The scalping-knife had already done its bloody work, and the hideous trophies were seen drooping from the points of spears triumphantly poised by the savage victors.

Their triumph had cost them dear. On the plain outside, and around the captured wagons, at least fifty of their own men lay dead upon the sand, while a group here and there, bending over some recumbent form, told of a warrior wounded.

A band of twenty or thirty braves had gone in pursuit of the two whites who had escaped. Those that remained at once set about collecting the corpses of their slain comrades, with the intent to inter them, while the bodies of their butchered enemies were submitted to still further mutilation. A resistance unexpected, causing them such

grievous loss, had roused their vengeance to the point of exasperation, and they could only expend it upon corpses. These were hashed and hacked with tomahawks, pierced with spears and arrows, beaten with war-clubs, and dragged at the tails of horses.

It was a spectacle of fiendish spite—unlike anything that might be supposed to occur upon earth—only to be compared to a scene in the infernal regions, with demons for the actors.

The party that had gone off in pursuit, after a time returned. They did not bring either captives or scalps. But their report was satisfactory. They had followed the fugitives first to the upper plain. They could not have escaped in that way, as they would have been seen for miles off, and there was not time for them to retreat to such a distance. They had then got upon the true trail, and found the hole in the rocks, where the two men must have taken shelter. No one had dared to go into it. That would have been like attacking a grizzly bear in its den. But they had sent down stones to do the deadly work, and if these failed, the smoke of the creosote plant must have finished them. To make sure, however, they had rolled a stone over the aperture of the cavern, closing it up forever. Twenty men had laid their shoulders to it, and there was no fear that the two could ever stir it from its place. Living or dead, the white men would never more be seen upon the earth.

So reported the returned party of pursuers.

A scene next ensued in which the grotesque and terrible were strangely commingled. The plunder of the wagons began, and with it the distribution of the goods. Some of these had been destroyed or damaged by the fire, but there was still fifty thousand dollars' worth left to satisfy the cupidity of the spoilers. They consisted of assorted merchandise—some hardware, in the shape of knives, daggers, and pistols; some mirrors and fancy articles, but chiefly cotton prints of attractive colors and patterns, along with a considerable quantity of silken stuffs and laces, for the dames of Chihuahua and Durango.

The distribution was not equal to all. The goods, when taken out of the wagons, were first separated into three portions of like value. One of these was distributed in equal allotments to each of the common braves of the band; a second was reserved for the chief, while the third, by a sort of tacit consent, as if from previous understanding, became the property of a man who was neither brave nor chief, but seemed to hold authority over both.

This man differed from the others, not by the dress he wore, for he was in complete Indian costume, nor yet by the color of his skin, for he was bronze-black like the rest. The distinction lay in his having hair on his face—in fact, a full beard, with whiskers on the cheek.

After all, this circumstance could not be considered so strange in a band of Comanche or Apache Indians, among whom there are many men with Spanish-American blood in their veins, some, indeed, Mexicans themselves—pris-

oners who from necessity have become connected with the tribes, or outlawed criminals who, finding savage life congenial, have taken to it from choice.

There were two or three others among the captors of the caravan who also had hair upon their faces, though none so fully furnished with the Caucasian sign of manhood as the personage to whom was appropriated a share of the spoils equal to that of the chief.

The conduct of this man was in other respects equally *mysterious*. In the fight he had taken no part, standing at a safe distance as a spectator, only now and then lending the aid of his counsel, imparted in low tones to the chief.

When the conflict was ended, and the caravan in possession of the victors, he had displayed more energy in assisting to extinguish the fire. This having been accomplished, he was seen to stoop over the bodies of the whites who had fallen, passing from one to the other, and giving to each an examination, as if in their ghastly features he expected to identify some old *enemy*.

From all, however, one after the other, he seemed to turn away disappointed.

Another act on the part of this personage of like strange and *mysterious* seeming. After the pursuing party had returned and made their report, as if to assure himself of its correctness, he started off toward the ravine up which the chase had gone. He entered the chasm, clambering over the carcass of Wilder's horse, still there, and keeping on up the gorge, reached the platform penetrated by the shaft-

like cavern. He saw where the huge boulder had been displaced from its bed, and, after going around the rock, and on all sides examining it, as if to assure himself that the aperture was all covered, he stood for sometime with a grim smile of satisfaction playing upon his savage features.

Then, giving an ejaculatory grunt, and muttering a word or two that sounded like Spanish, he turned away from the spot and retraced his steps to the plains.

All this occurred before the division of the spoils. When the distribution was complete, and each warrior had appropriated his own share, a new scene was enacted, in which the grotesque held a predominant place.

There was a barrel of whisky in one of the wagons, still more than half filled with the white man's fire-water. It, also, was distributed, and soon found its way down the throats of the savages. Two-thirds of the tribe became intoxicated. Some of them were dead drunk, and lay sleeping upon the sand. Others, of stronger stomachs or more excitable brains, kept their feet, or, rather, did they forsake them by springing to the backs of their horses.

A sort of frenzied frolic seemed to seize them. They forgot their slain comrades yet unburied, and, careering around at full gallop, with the scalps of the white men poised upon their spears, they whooped, and shouted, and laughed, till the cliffs echoed back the sounds of their demoniac mirth.

Some fastened the ends of pieces of cotton goods to the tails of their horses, then spurred out upon the plain, till

the piece, unwinding itself, played like a streamer behind them. Sometimes two horsemen would take each an end of the same piece and tie it to the tail of his own steed. The two would then gallop in opposite directions until the pluck came, and the strip of print would be torn apart wherever it was weakest. He who held the larger share would be the winner, with the right to appropriate the piece.

It was an original species of gambling, a race riot, a true saturnalia of savages.

CHAPTER X.

A LIVING TOMB.

Literally *buried alive*, as Walt Wilder had expressed it, were he and his companion.

They now understood what had caused the strange noise that had puzzled them, the rumbling followed by a crash. It was not the accidental falling of a portion of the cliff, as they had been half-supposing, but a deed of diabolical design—a huge rock rolled by the united strength of the savages, until it rested over the orifice of the shaft, completely covering and closing it.

It might have been done without any certain knowledge of their being inside—only to make things sure. It mattered not to the two men thus cruelly inclosed, for they knew that in any case there was no hope of their being rescued from what they now believed to be a *living tomb*.

That it was such, neither could doubt. The guide, gifted with herculean strength, had tried to move the stone on discovering how it lay. With his feet firmly planted in the projections below, and his shoulder to the rock above, he had given a heave that would have lifted a loaded wagon from its wheels.

The stone did not budge the tenth part of an inch.

There was not so much as a motion. He might as successfully have made trial to move a mountain from its base.

"All up wi' us, I reck'n," said the guide, as he once more let himself down upon the ledge to communicate the particulars to his companion.

Hamersley ascended to see for himself. They could only go one at a time. He examined the edge of the orifice where the rock rested upon it. He could only do so by feeling. Not a ray of light came in on any side, and, groping round and round, he could detect neither crevice nor void.

There were weeds and grass, still warm and smoldering, the debris of what had been set on fire for their fumigation. The rock rested on a bedding of these. Hence the exact fit closing every crack and crevice.

On completing his exploration, Hamersley returned to his companion below.

"Hopeless!" muttered Wilder, despondingly.

"No, Walt. I don't think so yet."

The Kentuckian, though young, was a man of remarkable intelligence, as well as courage. It needed these qualities to be a prairie-merchant—one who commanded a caravan. Wilder knew him to be possessed of them, in the last equal to himself, in the first far beyond him.

"You think thar's a chance for us to git out o' hyar?" he said, interrogatively.

"I think there is, and a likely one. If this cliff-rock

be only sandstone, or some other equally soft, we can cut our way out, under the big stone."

"Wagh! I didn't think o' that. Thar's sense in what ye say."

There was a short moment of silence, after which was heard a clinking sound, as of a knife-blade being struck against a stone. It was Hamersley with his bowie, chipping off a piece of the rock that formed the sides of the shaft.

The sound was pleasant to the Kentuckian's ear, for it was not the hard, metallic ring that would be given out by quartz or granite. On the contrary, the steel struck against it with a dull, dead echo, and he could feel that the point of the knife easily penetrated.

"Sandstone!" he said, "or something that'll serve our purpose equally as well. Yes, Walt, there's a good chance for us to git out of this ugly prison. So keep up your heart, comrade. It may cost us two or three days' quarrying. Perhaps all the better for that. The Indians are pretty sure to keep about the wagons for some time. They'll find enough there to amuse them. Our work will depend a good deal on what sort of a stone they've rolled over the hole."

The Kentuckian again climbed up; and soon after the guide heard a crinkling sound, succeeded by the rattling of pieces of rock, as they got detached and came showering down.

To save his crown, now uncovered by the loss of both

kerchief and cap, he stood back into the alcove that had originally protected them from the stones cast in by the Indians.

From the falling fragments, their size and number, he could tell that his comrade was making good way.

Walt longed to relieve him at his work, and sent up a request to this end. But Hamersley returned a refusal, speaking in a cautious tone, lest his voice might be borne out to the ear of some savage still lingering near.

For over an hour Wilder waited below, now and then casting impatient glances upward. They were only mechanical, for, of course, he could see nothing. But they were anxious withal, for the success of his comrade's scheme was yet problematical.

Suddenly a sight met his eyes which caused him to utter an exclamation of joy.

It was the sight of his comrade's face—only that.

But this had in it a world of significance. He could not have seen that face without *light*. Light had been let into their rock-bound abode, so late buried in the profoundest darkness.

It was but a feeble glimmer, that appeared to have found admission through a tiny crevice under the huge copestone, and Hamersley's face, close to it, was seen only in faint shadow—fainter from the film of smoke yet straggling up the shaft.

Still was it light, beautiful, cheerful light, like some

shore-beacon seen by the storm-tossed mariner amid the dangers of a night-shrouded sea.

Hamersley had not yet said a word to announce what had occurred to cause it. He had suddenly left off chipping, and was standing at rest, apparently in contemplation of the soft, silvery ray that was playing so benignly upon his features.

Was it the pleasure of once more beholding what he had lately thought he might never see again—the light of day? Was it this alone that was holding him still and speechless? No, something else, as his comrade learned when he rejoined him soon after on the ledge.

“Walt,” he said, “I’ve let daylight in, as you see; but I find it’ll take a long time to cut a passage out. It’s only the weeds I’ve been able to get clear of. The big rock runs over at least five feet, and the stone turns out harder than I thought for.”

These were not cheering words to the ear of Walt Wilder.

“But,” continued Hamersley, his speech changing to a more hopeful tone, “I’ve noticed *something* that may serve better still—perhaps save us all the quarrying. I don’t know whether I’m right, but we shall soon see.”

“What hev ye noticed?” was the question put by Wilder.

“You see there’s still some smoke around us?”

“Yes, Frank; my eyes tell me that putty plain. I’ve nigh rubbed ’em out o’ thar sockets.”

“Well, as soon as I had scooped out the crack that let in daylight, I noticed that the smoke rushed out as if blasted through a pair of bellows. That shows that there’s a draught somewhere. It can only come from some aperture below, acting as a furnace or the funnel of a chimney. We must try to get down to the bottom and see if there’s such a thing. If there be, who knows but it may be big enough to let us out of our prison without having to carve our way through the walls, which I feel certain would take us several days. We must try to get down to the bottom.”

To accede to this request the guide needed no urging; and both, one after the other, at once commenced descending.

They found no great difficulty in getting down, any more than they had already experienced, for the cavity continued all the way of nearly the same width, and very similar to what it was above the ledge. Near the bottom, however, it became abruptly wider by the recession of the walls. They were now in a dilemma, for they had reached a point where they could go no farther without dropping off. It might be ten feet, it might be a hundred; in any case, enough to make the peril appalling.

Wilder had gone first, and soon bethought himself of a test. He unstrung his powder-horn and permitted it to drop from his hand, listening attentively. It made scarcely any noise; still he could hear it striking against something soft. It was the brush thrown on by the Indians. It did

not seem far below, and the half-burnt stalks would be something to break the fall.

“I’ll chance it,” said Walt; and almost simultaneously with the words was heard the bump of his heavy body on the litter below. “Ye may jump without fear, Frank. ’Taint over six feet in the clear.”

Hamersley obeyed, and both stood at the bottom of the chimney, on the hearth-stone where the stalks of the creosote still smoldered.

CHAPTER XI.

OFF AT LAST.

Finding plenty of space around them, they scrambled off the pile of loose stones and stalks cast down by the Indians, and commenced groping their way about. Again striking the firm surrounding of rock, they followed it searchingly.

They were not long engaged in their game of blind-man's buff, when the necessity of trusting to the feel came abruptly to an end, as if a handkerchief had been suddenly jerked from their eyes. The change was caused by a light streaming in through a side gallery into which they had strayed. It was at first dim and distant, but soon shone upon them with the brilliance of a grand flambeau.

Following the passage through which it guided them, they reached an aperture of irregular roundish shape, about the size of the cloister window of a convent. They saw at once that it was big enough to admit the passage of their bodies. They saw, too, that it was admitting the sun, admonishing them that it was still far from night.

They had brought all their traps down along with them—their knives and pistols, with Hamersley's gun, still carefully kept. But they hesitated about going out. There

could be no difficulty in their doing so, for there was a ledge less than three feet under the aperture upon which they could find footing. It was not this that caused them to hesitate, but the fear of again falling into the hands of their implacable foes.

That these were still upon the plain they had evidence. They could hear their yells and whooping, mingled with peals of wild, demon-like laughter. It was at the time when the fire-water was in the ascendant, and they were playing their merry games with the pieces of despoiled cotton goods.

There was danger in going out, but there might be more in staying in. The savages might return upon their search, and discover this other entrance to the vault. In that case they would take still greater pains to close it, and besiege them to the point of starvation.

Both were desirous to escape from a place they had lately looked upon as a tomb.

Still they dared not venture out of it. They could not retreat by the plain so long as the Indians were upon it. At night, perhaps, in the darkness. It was Hamersley who suggested it.

“No,” said Walt; “nor at night eyther. It’s moon-time, you know, an’ them sharp-eyed Injuns niver all goes to sleep thegither. On that sand they’d see us in the moonlight most at plain as in the day. Ef we wait at all, we’ll hev to stay till they go clar off.”

Wilder, while speaking, stood close to the aperture,

looking cautiously out. At that moment, craning his neck to a greater stretch, so as to command a better view of what lay below, his eye caught sight of an object that elicited an exclamation of surprise.

“Durn it!” he said; “thar’s my old handkerchief lyin’ down thar on the rocks.”

It was the red kerchief he had plucked from his head to put the pursuers on the wrong track.

“It’s jest whar I flinged it,” he continued. “I kin recognize the place. That gully, then, must be the one we didn’t go up.”

Walt spoke the truth. The decoy was still in the place he had set it. The square of soiled and faded cotton had failed to tempt the cupidity of the savages, who knew that in the wagons they had captured were hundreds of such, clean and new, with far richer spoils besides.

“S’pose we still try that path, Frank. It may lead us to the top, arter all. If they’ve been up it, they’ve long ago gone down agin. I kin tell by thar yelpin’ around the wagons they’ve got holt o’ our corn-juice afore this, an’ won’t be so sharp in lookin’ arter us.”

“Agreed,” said Hamersley.

Without further delay the two scrambled out through the aperture, and creeping along the ledge, once more stood in the hollow of the ravine, at the point of its separation into the forks that had perplexed them in their ascent.

Again they faced upward, by the slope of the ravine yet untried.

In passing it, Walt laid hold of his handkerchief, and replaced it, turban-fashion, on his head.

"I only wish," he said, "I ked as convenient rekiver my rifle; an', durn me, but I wud try ef it war only thar still. It ain't, I know. That air piece is too precious for a Injun to pass it. It's gone back to the wagons."

They could now more distinctly hear the shouts of their despoilers; and as they continued the ascent, the rent in the cliff opened between them and the plain, giving them a glimpse of what was there going on.

They could see the savages—some on foot, others on horseback—the latter careering round as if engaged in a tournament, trailing like ribbons behind their horses long strips of cotton prints—the produce of the mills of Lowell and Manchester.

They saw they were roustering, wild with triumph and maddened with the fire-water they had found in the wagons.

"Though they be drunk, we mnstn't stay hyar so nigh 'em," muttered Walt. "I allers like to put space atween me an' sech as them. They moot git some whims into thar heads, an' come this ways. They'll take any amount o' trouble to raise har, an' they may be grievin' that they hain't got ourn yit, an' mout think they'd hev another try for it. As the night's bound to be a mooner, we can't git too fur from 'em. So let's on as quick's we kin."

“On, then !” said Hamersley, ascending ; and the next moment the two were rapidly ascending the gorge, Wilder leading the way.

This time they were more fortunate. The ravine sloped on up to the summit of the cliff, opening upon a level plain. They reached this without passing any point that could bring them under the eyes of the Indians.

They could still hear their shouts of triumph and intoxication ; but as they receded from the crest of the cliff, these grew fainter and fainter, until they found themselves fleeing over an open table-land, bounded above by the sky, all around them still as death—still as the heart of a desert.

CHAPTER XII.

DEPARTURE OF THE PLUNDERERS.

On the day after the capture of the caravan, the Indians, having consumed all the whisky found in the wagons, and become comparatively sober, prepared to move off.

The captured goods, made up into convenient parcels, were packed upon mules and spare horses, of which they had plenty, having come prepared for such a sequel to their attack upon the travelers.

The warriors, having given interment to their dead comrades, leaving the scalped and mutilated corpses of the white men to the vultures and wolves, mounted and marched off.

Before leaving the scene of their sanguinary exploits, they had drawn the wagons into a close clump and set fire to them—partly from a wanton instinct of destruction, partly from the pleasure of beholding a great bonfire, but also with some thought that it might be as well thus to blot out all traces of a tragedy for which the Americans—of whom even these freebooters felt dread—might some day call them to account.

They did not all go together, but separated into two parties on the spot where they had passed the night. They

were parties, however, of very unequal size, one of them numbering only four individuals. The other, which consisted of the main body of the plunderers, was, as Walt Wilder had conjectured, a band of the middle Comanches, known as the Tenawas, under their chief, the Horned Lizard. These, turning eastward, struck off toward the head-waters of the Big Wichita, upon which and its tributaries lies their customary roving-ground.

The lesser party went off in almost the opposite direction, south-westerly, leaving the Llano Estacado on their left, springing in, crossed the Rio Pecos at a point below and outside the furthest frontier settlement of New Mexico, toward the prairies. Then, shaping their course nearly due south, they skirted the spurs of the Sierra Blanca, that in this latitude extend east toward the Pecos. Their footsteps were now turned toward a depression seen in the Sierra Blanca, as if with the intention to cross the mountains toward the valley of the Del Norte. They might have reached the valley by a trail well known and often traveled, but it appeared as if this was just what they wanted to avoid.

One of the men composing this party was he already remarked upon as having a beard and whiskers. A second was the individual spoken of as more slightly furnished with these appendages, while the other two were absolutely beardless.

All four were of deep bronze complexion, and, to all appearance, pure-blooded Indians. That the two with

hirsute signs spoke to one another in Spanish was no sure evidence of their not being Indians. It was within the limits of New Mexican territory, where there are many Indians who converse in Castilian, and know no other language.

He with the whiskered cheeks, the chief of the quartette, as well as the tallest of them, had not left behind the share of the plunder that had been allotted to him. It was still in the train, borne on the backs of seven strong mules, heavily loaded. These formed a pack-train, guarded and driven by the two beardless men of the party, who seemed to understand mule-driving as thoroughly as if they had been trained to it.

The other two took no trouble with the pack animals, but rode on in front, conversing in a somewhat jocular manner.

The bearded man was astride a splendid black horse, not a small Mexican mustang like that of his companion, but a large, sinewy animal, that showed the breed of Kentucky. He was the same steed Frank Hamersley had been compelled to leave behind in that rapid rush for the crevice in the cliff.

"This time, Roblez, we've made a pretty fair haul of it," remarked he who bestrode the black horse. "What with the silks and laces—to say nothing of this splendid horse—I think I may say that our time has not been thrown away."

"Yours hasn't, anyhow. My share won't be much."

"Come, come, don't talk in that way. You should be satisfied with a share proportioned to your rank. Besides, you must remember, the man who puts down the stake has a right to draw the winnings. But for me there would have been no spoils to share. Isn't that so?"

This truth seemed to produce its impression upon the mind of Roblez; he made response in the affirmative.

"Well, I'm glad you acknowledge it," pursued the rider of the black. "Let there be no disputes between us; for you know, Roblez, we can't afford to quarrel. You shall have a liberal percentage on this lucky venture; I promise it. By the by, how much do you think the plunder ought to realize?"

"Well," responded Roblez, restored to a cheerful humor, "if properly disposed of in El Paso or Chihuahua, the lot ought to fetch from fifteen to twenty thousand dollars. I see some silk velvet among the stuff that would sell high if you could only get it shown to the damsels of Durango or Zacatecas. One thing sure, you've got a good third of the caravan stock."

"Ha, ha, ha! More than half in value. Horned Lizard went in for bulk. I let him have it to his heart's content. He thinks more of those cheap cotton prints, with their red, and green, and yellow flowers, than all the silk ever spun since the days of Mother Eve. Ha, ha, ha!"

The laugh, in which Roblez heartily joined, was still echoing on the air, as the two horsemen entered a pass

leading through the mountains. It was the depression in the mountain chain seen shortly after parting with the Horned Lizard and his band. It is a pass, rugged with rock and almost trackless, here and there winding about, and sometimes continued through canons or clefts barely wide enough to give way to the mules with the loads on their backs.

For all this the animals of the travelers seemed to journey along it without difficulty, only the American horse showing any signs of awkwardness. All the others went as if they had trodden it before.

Just before sunset the party came to a halt, not in the defile itself, but in one of still more rugged aspect that led into the side of the mountain. In this there was no trace or sign of travel, no appearance of its having ever been entered by man or animal.

Yet the horse ridden by Roblez, and the pack-mules coming after, entered with as free a step as if going into a well-known inclosure. True the chief of the party, mounted on the Kentuckian steed, had gone on before them, but this scarcely accounted for their confidence.

Up this interior gorge they rode until they had reached its end. There was no outlet, for it was a natural court, such as are often found among the mountains of Mexico.

At its extremity, where it narrowed to a width of about fifty feet, lay a huge boulder of granite that appeared to block up the path, though there was evidently space between it and the cliff, rising vertically behind it.

The obstruction was only apparent, and did not cause the leading savage to make even a temporary stop. At one side there was an opening large enough to permit the passage of a horse, and into this he rode, Roblez following, and also the mules in a string one after the other.

Behind the boulder was an open space of a few square yards, and extent enough to give room for the turning of a horse. The savage chief turned his horse and headed him direct for the cliff, not with the intention to dash his brains against the rock, but to force him into a cavern, the entrance of which was observed in the side of the precipice, dark and dismal as the door of an inquisitorial prison.

The horse snorted, and shied back ; but the ponderous Mexican spur, with its long, sharp rowel-points, soon drove him in, where he was followed by the mustang of Roblez and the mules, the latter going in as unconcernedly as if entering a stable whose stalls were familiar to them.

CHAPTER XIII.

A STRANGE TRANSFORMATION.

✓✓ It was well on in the afternoon of the following day before the four spoil-laden savages, who had gone into the cavern, again showed themselves outside. Then came they filing forth, one after another, in the same order as they had entered, but all so changed in appearance that no one seeing them come out of the cave could by any possibility have recognized them as the same men who had the night before gone into it.

Even their animals had undergone some transformation. The horses were differently caparisoned, the flat American saddle having been removed from the back of the grand Kentucky steed, and replaced by one of Mexican pattern. The mules, too, were rigged in a different manner, each having the regular pack-saddle, while the spoils, no longer loose, carelessly tied-up bundles, were made up into neat packs, as goods in regular transportation.

The two men who conducted them had altogether a changed appearance. Their skins were still of the same color—the pure bronze-black of the Indian—but, instead of the eagle's feathers lately sticking up above their crowns, both had their heads now covered with simple

straw hats, while sleeveless coats of coarse woollen stuff, with stripes running transversely, shrouded their shoulders, their limbs having free play in white cotton drawers of ample width. A leathern belt, and apron of reddish-colored sheepskin, tanned, completed the costume.

But the change in the two other men—the chief and him addressed as Roblez—was of a far more striking kind. They had entered the cave as Indians, warriors of the first rank, plumed, painted, and adorned with all the devices and insignia of savage heraldry. They came out of it as white men, wearing the costume of well-to-do town traders, broad glazed hats upon their heads, cloth jackets and trousers, the latter having the seats and the inside of the legs protected with a lining of stamped leather. Boots, with heavy spurs upon their feet, crape sashes around the waist, machetes (large knives) strapped along the flaps of their saddles, and blankets resting folded over the croup, gave the finishing touch to their traveling equipment. These, with the well-appointed mules, made the party one of peaceful merchants transporting their merchandise from town to town.

On coming out of the cave, the leader, looking fresh and bright from his change of toilet, and the late purification of his skin, glanced up toward the sky, as if to consult the sun for telling him the hour. At the same time he drew a gold watch from his vest-pocket and looked also at that.

“We’ll be just at the right time, Roblez,” he said.

“Six hours yet before sunset. That will get us out into the valley and in the river road, where we’re not likely to meet any one after night in these days of Indian alarms. Four more will bring us to Albuquerque, long after our sleepy town-folks have gone to bed. We’ve let it go late enough anyhow, and mustn’t delay here any longer.”

All started together down the gorge, the speaker, as before, leading the way, Roblez next, and the men with their laden mules strung out in the rear.

Soon after they re-entered the mountain defile, and once heading north-westward, silently continued their journey.

The sun was just sinking over the far western mountains when the precipitous walls of the Sierra Blanca, opening wide on each side of the defile, disclosed to the spoil-laden party a view of the broad level plain known as the valley of the Del Norte.

Soon after they had descended to it, and in the midst of night, with a starry sky overhead, were traversing the level road upon which the broad wheel-tracks of rude country carts told of the proximity of settlements. It was a country road, leading out from the foot-hills of the Sierra to a crossing of the river near the village of Tome.

Turning northward above Tome, the white robbers, late disguised as Indians, pursued their course toward the town of Albuquerque. Any one meeting them on the road would have mistaken them for a party of traders on their way from the Rio Abujó to the capital of Santa Fe. But they went not so far. Albuquerque was the goal of their

journey, though on arriving there, which they did a little after midnight, they made no stop in the town, nor any noise to disturb the inhabitants, at that hour asleep.

Passing silently through the unpaved streets, they kept on a little farther. A large house, or *hacienda*, tree-shaded, and standing outside the suburbs, was the stopping-place they were aiming at, and toward this they directed their course. There was a cupola upon the roof, the same beside which Colonel Miranda and his American guest, just twelve months before, had stood smoking their cigars.

As then, there was a guard of soldiers within the covered entrance, with a sentry outside the gate. He was leaning against the postern, his form in the darkness just distinguishable against the gray-white of the wall.

"Who goes there?" he hailed, as the two horsemen rode up, the hoof-strokes startling him out of a half-drunken doze.

"The colonel in command," responded the tall man, in a tone that told of authority.

It proved to be countersign sufficient, the speaker's voice being instantly recognized.

The sentry, bringing his piece to the salute, permitted the horsemen to pass without further parley, as also the entire train, all entering and disappearing within the dark door-way, just as they had made entrance into the mouth of the mountain cavern.

While listening to the hoof-strokes of the animals ring-

ing on the pavement inside, the sentinel had his reflections and conjectures. He wondered where the colonel could have been to keep him so long absent from his command, and he had perhaps other conjectures of an equally perplexing nature. They did not much trouble him, however. What mattered it to him how the commandant employed his time, or where it was spent, so long as he got his rations. He had them with due regularity, and, with this consoling reflection, he re-wrapped his yellow cloak around him, leaned back against the wall, and soon after succumbed to the state of semi-watchfulness from which the unexpected advent had aroused him.

“Ah, Roblez!” said the colonel, to his subordinate, when, after looking to the storage of the plunder, the two sat together in a well-furnished apartment of the *hacienda*, with a table, decanter, and glasses between them, “it’s been a long, tedious tramp, hasn’t it? Well, we’ve not wasted our time, nor had our toil for nothing. Come, fill your glass again, and let us drink to our mercantile adventure. Here’s that in the disposal of our goods we may be as successful as in their purchase.”

Right merrily the lieutenant refilled his glass and responded to the toast of his superior officer.

“I suspect, Roblez,” continued the colonel, “that you have been all the while wondering how I came to know about this caravan whose spoil is to enrich us, its route, the exact time of its arrival, the strength of its defenders,

everything. You think our friend, the Horned Lizard, gave me the information."

"No, I don't, since that could not well be. How was Horned Lizard to know himself—that is, in time to have sent word to you? In truth, colonel, I am, as you say, in a quandary about all that. I cannot guess at the explanation."

"This would give it to you, if you could read. But I know you cannot. Never mind; I shall read it for you."

As the colonel was speaking, he had taken from the drawer of a desk that stood close by, a sheet of paper, folded in the form of a letter. It was one, though it bore no postmark. For all that, it looked as if it had traveled far, perchance carried by hand. It had, in truth, come all the way across the prairies. Its superscription was:

"El Coronel Miranda, comandante del distrito militar de Albuquerque, Nuevo Mexico."

Its contents, also in Spanish, translated read thus:

"MY DEAR COLONEL MIRANDA:—I am about to carry out the promise made to you at our parting. I have my mercantile enterprise in a forward state of readiness for a start over the plains. My caravan will not be a large one, about six or seven wagons, with less than a score of men; but the goods I take are valuable. I intend taking departure from the frontier town of Van Buren, in the State of Arkansas, and shall go by a new route lately discovered by one of our prairie-traders, that leads part way along the Canadian River, by you called 'Rio de la Canada,' and skirting the great plains of the Llano Estacado at its upper end. This southern route makes us more independent of the season, so that I shall be able to travel in

the fall. If nothing occurs to delay me on the route, I shall reach New Mexico about the middle of November, when I anticipate renewing those relations of a pleasant friendship in which you have been all the giver and I all the receiver. I send this by one of the spring caravans, starting from Independence for Santa Fe. In the hope that it will safely reach you, I subscribe myself, dear Colonel Miranda,

Your grateful friend,

“FRANCIS HAMERSLEY.”

“Well, Roblez,” said his colonel, as he folded the letter and returned it to the desk, “do you comprehend matters any clearer?”

“Clear as the sun,” was the reply of the lieutenant, whose admiration for the executive talents of his superior officer, along with the bumpers he had imbibed, had now exalted his fancy to a poetical elevation. “I see it all, every move in the game. It’s a splendid hit, worthy of even the great Santa Anna.”

“A greater stroke than you yet think it, for it is double, two birds killed with the same stone. Let us again drink to it.”

The glasses were once more filled, and once more did the associated bandits toast the nefarious enterprise they had so successfully accomplished.

Then Roblez rose to go to the barracks, where he had his place of sleeping and abode, bidding good-night to his colonel.

The latter also bethought him of bed; and, taking a lamp from the table, commenced moving toward his sleeping chamber.

On coming opposite a picture suspended against the wall—the portrait of a beautiful girl—he stopped in front, and for a moment gazed at it, then into a mirror that stood close by. As if there was something in the glass that reflected its shadow into his very soul, the expression of exultant triumph, so late depicted upon his face, was all at once swept from it, giving place to a look of black bitterness.

“One is gone,” he said, in a half-muttered soliloquy; “one part of the stain wiped out; thank Heaven for that. But the other; and *she*—where, where?”

And, with these words, he staggered on toward his chamber.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE "STAKED PLAIN."

The tract of territory known as the "Ilano Estacado," or, Staked Plain, rises above the surrounding country, with a well-marked boundary, either a precipitous slope or a sheer verticle escarpment. Its elevation has been variously stated from five hundred to two thousand feet, the diversity of statement due partly to guess estimates, and partly to its having been viewed at different points. Eight hundred feet will be about the average height of its surface above the surrounding prairies, these again having about twice that elevation above the level of the sea.

The Staked Plain extends longitudinally between what in Hispano-Mexican times were the provinces of Nuevo-Mexico and Texas, having for their respective capitals Santa Fe and San Antonio de Bejar. Between these there was a necessary intercourse, both of a mercantile and military character. This was carried on by a route that ran in a slanting direction across the Staked Plain, a little to the north of its center, striking on the Texan side the head-water of the Colorado. To avoid straying, from what the desert drift prevented from becoming a *trace*, the vice-regal government took the precaution to have posts or

stakes set up, at such a distance apart as to be seen from one another.

Hence the name of this strange tract—*El Llano Estacado*, or "The Staked Plain"—a title it is likely to bear to the end of time, as well as the trackless sterility which was the cause of its being bestowed.

The place where the American caravan had been attacked was in the bed of a dry water-course, resembling a sand-plain. In time of rain only was there water in it, when it became a confluent of the Goo-al-pah, or Canadian river. Directly over it frowned the precipitous bluff, up which the young prairie-merchant and his guide, after their series of hair-breadth escapes, had succeeded in climbing. It was the scarped edge of a spur of the Staked Plain, and it was into this sterile tract they were now fleeing.

A glance was sufficient to satisfy them that only by distance could they obtain concealment. Far as the eye could reach, the surface appeared a perfect level, without shrub or tree. There was not cover enough to give hiding-place to a hare. Although now on a full run, and with no appearance of being pursued, they were far from being confident of escaping.

At short intervals the great brown head of the guide swept over his left shoulder, as he cast anxious glances behind him. He was all the more anxious on observing—which he now did—that his fellow-fugitive flagged in his pace, and showed signs of giving out.

With a quick comprehension, and without any questions asked, the guide understood the reason. In the smoke-cloud that had covered their retreat from the corraled wagons, and afterward in the somber shadow of the chasm and the deeper darkness of the cave, he had not observed what now, in the bright glare of the sun, was too plainly apparent—that the garments of his comrade was saturated with blood!

Hamersley had scarcely noticed it himself, and his attention was now called to it, less from perceiving any acute pain than that he began to feel faint and feeble. Blood was oozing through the breast of his shirt, down the legs of his pantaloons, and over his boots; and the fountain from which it proceeded was fast disclosing itself by an aching in his side that increased as he ran on.

A moment's pause to examine it. When the vest and shirt were torn aside, it was seen that a bullet had passed through his left side, causing only a flesh-wound, but cutting an artery in its course. Scratched and cut in several other places, for the time equally as painful, he had not given heed to this more serious wound.

It was not mortal, nor likely to prove so. The guide and hunter, like most of his calling, was a rough, practical surgeon; and after giving it a hurried examination, pronounced it "only a scratch," and urged his companion onward.

Again starting, they-proceeded at the same quick pace ; but before they had made another mile, the wounded man

felt his weakness again overcoming him, and the rapid run was succeeded by a slow dog-trot, soon after decreasing to a walk, and at length ending in a dead stop.

"I can go no farther, Walt—not if all the demons of darkness were at my heels. I've done my best. If the savages come after, you keep on and leave me."

"Niver, Frank Hamersley—niver! Walt Wilder ain't the man to sep'rate from a kimrade, an' leave him in a fix that way. If you must pull up, so do this child. An' I see ye must—thar's no behelp for it."

"I could not go a step farther."

"Enuff! But don't let's stan' to be seed miles off. Squat's the word. Down on yur stomach, like a toad under a harrer. Thur's jest a resemblance o' kiver hyur 'mong these tussocks o' buffler grass; an' this child ain't the most onconspicrousest objeck on this plain. Let's down on our breast ribs, an' lay flat as pancakes."

Suiting his actions to his words, and by way of example, the guide brought his tall figure to the ground in a horizontal extension of at least six feet six inches.

Hamersley, already tottering, dropped down by his side; as he did so, leaving the plain, far as the eye could reach, without salient object to intercept the vision, any more than might have been seen on the surface of a sleeping ocean.

It was in favor of the fugitives that the day had now well declined; and they had not remained very long before

the sun, sinking below the western horizon, gave them an opportunity of once more getting upon their feet.

They did so, glad to escape from a position whose restraint had become exceedingly irksome. They had suffered from the hot atmosphere, rising like caloric from the parched plain. But now that the sun had gone down, a cool breeze began to play over its surface, fanning them to a fresh energy. Besides, the night closing over them and the moon not yet up, removed the necessity for lying any longer in concealment, and they could proceed onward without fear.

Hamersley felt as if fresh blood had been infused into his veins, and he was ready to spring to his feet at the same time with his comrade.

"Frank, d'ye think ye kin go a little farrer now?" was the interrogatory put by the hunter.

"Yes, Walt—miles farther," was the response. "I feel as if I could walk across the grandest spread of prairie."

"Good!" ejaculated the guide. "I'm glad to hear you talk that way. If we kin yit git a few more miles atween us an' them yelpin' savages, we may hev a chance o' salvation yit. The wust o' the thing is that we don't know which way to go. It's a toss up 'tween 'em. If we turn back torst the Canadyan, we may meet 'em agin, an' right in the teeth. Westart lie the settlements o' the Del Norte, but we won't come on the same Injuns by goin' that direckshun. Southart this staked plain hain't no endin' till ye git down to the Grand River, below its big bend,

and that ain't to be thort o'. By striking east, a little southart, we mout reach the head sources o' the Loozyany Red; an' oncest on a stream o' runnin' water, this chile kin ginerally navigate down it—provided he hev a rifle, powder, an' a bullet or two in his pouch. Thank the Lord, we've stuck to yourn through the thick an' the thin o't. Ef we hedn't, we mout jest as well lie down agin an' make a die o't at oncest."

"Go which way you please, Walt; you know best. I am ready to follow you, and I think I shall be able."

"Wal, at anyhow, we'd best be movin' off from hyar. If we can't go a great ways under kiver o' the night, I reckon we kin put enny puraira atween ourselves an' these Injuns to make sure agin them spyin' us in the mornin'. So let's start south-eastard, an' try for the 'sources o' the Red. Thar's that ole beauty o' the north star that's been my friend an' guide many's the good time. Thar it is, makin' the handle o' the plow, or the great bar, as I've heerd that air colleckshun o' stars frekwently called. We've only to keep it on our left, a leetle torst the back o' the shoulder, an' then we're boun' to bring out on some o' the head forks o' the Red—if we ken only last long enuf to reach 'em. Durn it, thar's no danger, an' anyhow thar's no help for it but try. Come on."

So saying the hunter started forward, not in full stride, as he would otherwise have done, but timing his pace to suit the feeble steps of his disabled companion.

CHAPTER XV.

A LILIPUTIAN FOREST.

Guiding their course by the stars, the fugitives continued on, no longer going in a run, or even in a very rapid walk. Despite the resolution with which he endeavored to nerve himself, the wounded man was still too weak to make much progress, and they advanced but slowly over the plain.

Nor did they proceed a very great distance before again coming to a halt, though far enough to feel sure that, standing erect, they could not be seen by any one who might ascend the cliff at their place of departure from it. But they had also reached that which offered them a chance of cover—in short, a forest. It was a forest not discernable at more than a mile's distance, for the trees that composed it were "skin oaks," the tallest not rising to a height of over eighteen inches above the surface of the ground. Eighteen inches was enough to conceal the body of a man, lying in a prostrate attitude, and, as the liliputian trees grew thick as jimson weeds, the cover would be a secure one.

Becoming convinced that there was no longer a likelihood of their being pursued across the plain, the hunter

proposed that they should again stop, this time to obtain sleep, which, in their anxiety during their previous period of rest, they had not thought of.

Walt made the proposal out of consideration for his comrade, who for sometime, as he saw, had been evidently laboring to keep up with him.

“We kin lie by till sun-up,” he said; “an’ then, ef we see any sign o’ pursoot, kin stay hyar till the sun go down agin. These slim oaks will gie us kiver enuff; squatted, there’ll be no chance o’ thar diskiverin’ us, unless they stumble right a-top o’ us.”

His companion was not in the mood to make objection, and the two laid themselves along the earth, the miniature forest not only giving them the protection of a screen, but a soft bed, as their tiny trunks and leaf-laden branches became spread beneath their bodies.

They staid awake only long enough to give Hamersley’s wound such dressing as the circumstances would permit, and then both sank into slumber.

With the young prairie-merchant it was neither deep nor profound. Horrid visions floated before his wrapt senses—scenes of red carnage—causing him ever and anon to awake with a start, once or twice with a cry that also aroused his companion.

Otherwise Walt Wilder would have slept as soundly as if reposing on the couch of a log-cabin a thousand miles removed from any Indian danger. It was no new thing for him to go to sleep with the yell of the savage sounding

in his ears. For a period of over twenty years he had daily or nightly stretched his huge frame along mountain slope or level prairie, and often with far more danger of having his "hair raised" before standing erect again.

For ten years Walt had belonged to the Texas Rangers, that strange organization that had existed ever since Stephen Austin had first planted his colony on the territory of the "Lone Star."

If on this night the ex-ranger was more than usually restless, 'twas from anxiety about his disabled comrade, and the state of his nervous system, stirred to feverish excitement by the terrible conflict through which they had just passed. Notwithstanding all, he slumbered in long spells, at times snoring like an alligator.

At no time did he stand in need of so much sleep, even after the most protracted toil. Six hours was his usual daily or nocturnal dose; and, as the gray dawn began to glimmer over the tops of the slim oaks, he sprang to his feet, shook the dew from his shoulders like a startled stag, and then bent down to examine the condition of his comrade.

"Don't ye git up yit, Frank," he said. "We mustn't start till we hev a clur view all roun', an' be sure there's nary redskin in sight. Then we kin take the sun a little on our left cheek an' make tracks to the south-eastart. How is't wi' ye, Frank?"

"I feel weak as water; still I think I can travel a little farther."

"Wal, we'll go slow. Ef there's none o' the skunks arter us, we kin take our own time. Do you know, Frank, I've been hevin' a dream 'bout them Injuns as attacked us?"

"A dream? So have I. It is not strange for either of us to dream of them. What was yours, Walt?"

"Kewrus enuff mine war, though it wan't all a dream. I reckon I war moren half awake when I tuk to thinkin' about 'em, an' t'war somethin' I seed durin' the skrimmage. Didn't you observe nothin' queer?"

"Rather say nothing that was not that way. It was all queer enough, and terrible, too."

"That this child will admit wi' full freedom. But I've fit redskin afore in all sorts and shapes, yit never sech redskin as them."

"In what did they differ from other savages? I saw nothing."

"But I did; leastway, I suspect I did. Didn't you note 'mong the lot two or three that had har on thar faces?"

"Yes, I noticed that; I thought nothing of it. It's common among the Comanches, and other tribes of the Mexican territory, many of whom are of mixed breed, from the captive Mexican women they took long ago."

"The har I seed didn't look like it grew on the face o' a mixed blood."

"But there's also pure white men among them—outlaws who have run away from civilization and turned renegades, as also captives they have taken who become

Indianized, as the Mexicans call it. No doubt it was some of these we have seen."

"Wal, you may be right, Frank. Sartint thar war one I seed wi' a beerd most as big's my own, only it war black. His hide war black, too, or nigh to it; but ef that skunk wan't *white* underneath a coatin' o' charcoal an' vermilion, then Walt Wilder don't know a Kristyan from a heethin. 'Tain't no use speklatin on't now. White, black, yellar, or a red, they've put us afoot on the praira, an kum darned nigh wipin' us out altogether. We've got a fair chance o' goin' under yit, eyther from thirst or the famishment o' empty stomaks. I am hungry enuff to eat a coyoat. Thar's a heavy row afore us, Frank, an' we mus' strengthen our hearts to hoein o' it. Wal, the sun's up, an' as thar don't appear to be any obstruckshun, I reckon we'd best be makin' tracks."

Hamersley slowly and somewhat reluctantly rose to his feet. He still felt himself in a poor condition for traveling. But to stay there was to die; and, bracing himself to the effort, he stepped out, side by side with his huge companion.

CHAPTER XVI.

STRUGGLING AMONG THE SAGES.

It is the fifth day after forsaking their couch among the skin-oaks, and the two fugitives are still traveling upon the Staked Plain. They have not made more than sixty miles to the south-eastward, and have not yet struck any of the streams leading out to the lower level of the Texan champaign.

Their progress has been slow. The wounded man, instead of recovering strength, has but grown feebler; his steps are now unequal and tottering. In addition to the loss of blood, something else has aided to disable him—the fierce cravings of hunger, and the yet more insufferable agony of thirst. His companion is similarly afflicted; if not to as great a degree, enough to make him almost stagger in his steps. Neither has had any water since the last drop drank amid the wagons before commencing the fight; and since then, in fervent sun shining daily down upon them, no food save crickets caught on the plain, an occasional horned frog, and some fruits of the opuntia cactus—these last obtained sparingly.

Hunger has made sad havoc with both. Already at the end of the sixth day they are skeletons—more like specters than men.

And the scene around them is in keeping. The plain, far as the eye can reach, is covered with *artemisia*, whose horny foliage, in close contact at the tops, displays a continuation of surface, like a vast winding-sheet spread over the world.

Across this fall the shadows of the two men, proportioned to respective heights. The shadows of the two men are not the only ones that move over the silvery surface of the *artemisia*. There, too, are outlined the wings of birds—large birds, with sable plumage and red, naked necks, whose species both well knew. They are the *zopilotes*—the buzzard-vultures of Mexico. A score of such shadows are flitting over the sage; a score of the birds are wheeling in the air above.

It is a sight to pain the traveler, even when seen at a distance. Over his own head it may inspire him with distress and fear, for he cannot fail to read in it a forecast of his fate.

The birds were following the men just as they would a wounded buffalo or stricken deer. They soared in a circle above them, at times swooping portentously near. *They* did not believe them to be specters. Skeletons, as the travelers appeared, there would be a banquet upon their bones.

Now and then Walt Wilder cast a glance up toward them. It was anxious, though he took care to hide his anxiety from his comrade. He cursed them, but not in speech—only in his heart, and silently.

For a time the wearied wayfarers kept on without exchanging a word. Hitherto consolation had come from the ranger; but he seemed to have spent his last phrase, and was himself now despairing.

In Hamersley's heart hope had been gradually dying out as his strength became further exhausted. At length the latter gave out, the former at the same time becoming extinguished.

"No farther, Walt!" he exclaimed, coming to a halt. "I can't go a step farther. There's a fire in my throat that chokes me—something grasps me within. It is dragging me to the ground."

The hunter stopped too. He made no attempt to urge his comrade on. He saw it would be idle.

"Go yourself," Hamersley added, gasping out the words. "You have yet strength left, and may reach water. I cannot; but I can die. I'm not afraid to die. Leave me, Walt—leave me."

"Never!" was the response, in a hoarse, husky voice, but firm as if it came from the throat of a speaking-trumpet.

"You will—you must! Why should two lives be sacrificed for one? Yours may still be saved. Take the gun along with you. You may find something. Go, comrade—friend, go!"

Again the same response, in the same firm tone.

"I said when we war in the fight," added the colossus, "and afterward gallopin' thro' the smoke, that livin' or

dyin' we'd got to stick thegither. Didn't I say that, Frank Hamersley? I repeat it now. Ef we go under hyar in the middle o' this sage bush, Walt Wilder air agoin' to wrap his karkiss in a corner o' the same windin'-sheet. Thar ain't much strength left in his ole skeleton now, but enuf, I reckon, to keep them buzzards off for a good spell yit. They don't pick our bones till I've thinned thar count, anyhow. Ef we air to be rubbed out, it'll be by the chokin' o' thirst, an' not the gripin' o' hunger. What durned fools we've been not to a thunk on't afore; but who'd iver think o' eatin' turkey-buzzart? Wal, it's die dog or swaller the hatchet; so, nasty as their flesh may be, hyar goes to git a meal o' it!"

While speaking he had carried the gun to his shoulder, and simultaneously with his last words came the crack, quickly followed by the descent of a dead turkey-buzzard among the sages.

"Now, Frank," he said, picking up the bird, while the scared flock flew farther away, "let's light a bit o' a fire an' cook it. Thar's plenty o' sage fur the stuffin', an' its own flavor 'll do for the seasonin' o' the inyins. I reckon we kin git some on't down by shettin' our noses, an' at all iverents, it'll keep us alive a leetle longer. Wagh! ef we only hed water!"

As if some fresh hope had come suddenly across his mind, he once more raised himself erect on tiptoe, to the full stretch of his gigantic stature, and gazed eastwardly across the plain.

"Thar's a ridge o' hills out that way," he said. "I'd jest spied it when you spoke o' givin' out. Whar thar's hills thar's a likelihood o' water. S'posin', Frank, you stay hyar, while I make tracks torst them. They look like they warn't mor'n ten mile off, anyhow. I ked eezy git back by the morn'. D'ye think ye ked hold out thet long by eatin' a bit o' the buzzart?"

"I think I could hold out that long as well without eating it. It's the thirst that's killing me. I feel as if there was fire running through my veins. If you think there is any chance of finding water go, Walt, go, and leave the buzzard till you come back."

"I'll do it; but don't you sturve in the meanwhile. Cook the critter aforo lettin' it kum to thet. You've got punk, an' kin make a fire out o' the sage brush. I don't intend to run the risk o' sturvin' myself, an' as I mayent find anything on the way, I'll take one o' these sweet-smellin' chickens along wi' me."

He had already reloaded the rifle, and once more poisoning its muzzle toward the sky, he brought down a second buzzard.

"Now, Frank," he said, taking up the foul bird and slinging it to his belt, "keep up yur heart till this child return to ye. I'm sure o' gettin' back by the mornin'; an' to make sartin 'bout the place, jest you squat unner the shadder o' yon big palmetto, the which I can see far enuf off to find the place 'ithout hevin' any defeequilty."

The palmetto spoken of was, in truth, not a "palmetto,"

though a plant of kindred genus. It was a *yucca*, of a species peculiar to the high table-plains of northern and central Mexico, with long, sword-shaped leaves springing aloof-like from a core in the center, and radiating in all directions. Its top rose nearly six feet above the surface of the ground, and high over the artemisias; while its dark, rigid spikes, contrasting with their frosted foliage, rendered it a conspicuous landmark that could be seen afar off upon the plain.

Staggering on till he stood by it, Hamersley dropped down on its eastern side, where its dark shadow gave him protection from the sun, still fervid though setting; while that of Walt Wilder was again projected to its full length upon the plain, as, with the rifle across his shoulder and the turkey-buzzard dangling down his thigh, he took his departure from the spot, going eastward toward the ridge, dimly discernable in the distance.

CHAPTER XVII.

A HUNTRESS.

"Come, Lolita! Hold up, my pretty pet! Two leagues more, and you shall bury that velvet muzzle of yours in the soft grass, and cool your heated hoofs in the valley stream. Ay, and you shall have a half-peck of pinon nuts for your supper, I promise you. You've done well to-day, but don't now let us be belated. At night, you know, we might get lost in the pathless plain, and coyotes would eat us both up. That would be a sad thing. We must not let the jackals have a chance to dispose of us in that manner. So on."

"Lolita" was a pretty mustang mare, of golden-yellow color, with white mane and tail, while the personage thus apostrophizing her was a girl seated upon her back.

She was a beautiful girl, apparently under twenty years of age, but with a certain commanding mien that gave her the air of being older. Her complexion, though white, had a tinge of that golden-brown, or olivine, characteristic of the Andalusian skin, while cimeter-shaped eyebrows, with tresses of silken texture, black as the shadows of night, with a dark down on the upper lip, still more plainly proclaimed the Moorish admixture.

It was a face of lovely cast, and almost Grecian contour, the features of classic regularity.

The olive tint was Hispano-Mexican, a complexion if not more beautiful, certainly more picturesque than that of the fair Saxon.

With the damask-red dancing out upon her cheeks and eyes, aglow from the equestrian exercise, the girl looked the picture of perfect physical health, while the tranquil expression upon her features told of a mental contentment.

Strangest of all were her equipments and surroundings. She bestrode her mustang man-fashion—the mode of New Mexico—while a light fowling-piece, suspended by a strap, hung down behind her back.

A woolen shawl of finest wool lay, scarf-like, across her left shoulder, half concealing a velveteen vest or spencer, close buttoned over her bosom. Her small and shapely feet, visible beneath an embroidered short skirt, were booted and spurred.

On her head was a hat of soft vicuna wool, with a band of bullion, and a bordering of gold lace around the brim. This, with her attitude on horseback—that would appear odd in the eyes of a stranger to her country—the gun and its concomitant accouterments, might have given her a masculine appearance, and, at the first glance, have caused her to be mistaken for a man—a beardless youth.

But the long silken tresses scattered loosely over her shoulders, the finely cut features, the delicate texture of

the skin, the petticoat skirt, the small head and slender, tapering fingers stretched forward to caress the neck of the mustang-mare, were signs of femininity not to be mistaken.

A woman—a huntress! This last further declared by a brace of hounds, large dogs of the mastiff blood-hound breed, following on the heels of the horse; and a huntress who had been successful in the chase, as could be seen by two prong-horn antelopes, with shanks tied together, lying like saddle-bags along Lolita's flanks.

The mustang-mare needed no spur beyond the sound of that sweet, well-known voice. At the command to advance, she pricked up her ears, gave a wave to her snow-white tail, and broke into a gentle canter, the hounds following at a long-stretching trot.

For about ten minutes was this pace continued, when a bird, flying across the course so close that its wings almost brushed Lolita's snout, caused her mistress to lean back in her saddle and check her up.

The bird was a black vulture. It was not slowly soaring in the usual way, but shooting in a direct line, and swiftly as an arrow sent from the bow.

This it was that brought the huntress to a halt; and she for a time remained motionless, her eye following the vulture in its flight.

It was seen to join a flock of its fellows, so far off as to look like specks.

The young girl could perceive that they were not flying

in any particular direction, but soaring in circles, as if over some object that lay below. Whatever it was, they did not appear yet to have touched it. All kept aloft, none of them alighting on the ground, though at times swooping down and skimming close to the tops of the sage bushes with which the plain was thickly covered.

These last prevented the huntress from seeing what lay upon the ground, though she knew there must be something to have attracted the concourse of vultures. She had evidently enough knowledge of the desert to understand its signs, and this was one of a significant character. It not only challenged her curiosity, but seemed to court investigation.

"Something gone down yonder, and not yet dead," she muttered, in interrogative soliloquy. "I wonder what it can be? I never look on these filthy birds without fear. Oh! how they made me shudder that time when they flapped their black wings in our very faces. I pity any disabled creature threatened by them, even if it were but a coyote. It may be that, or an antelope. Nothing else likely to become their prey on this bare plain. Come, Lolita, let us go and see what they're after. It will take us a little out of our way, and give you some extra work. You won't mind that, my pet, I know you won't."

The mare came round to a slight pressure upon the rein, and then recommenced her canter in the direction of the soaring flock.

A mile passed over, and the birds were brought near.

But still the object attracting them could not be seen. It might be down among the artemisias, or perhaps behind a large yucca, whose leaves rose several feet above the sage, and over which the vultures were wheeling.

As the fair equestrienne had got within gun-shot distance of the yucca-plant, she checked her mustang to a slower pace—to a walk, in short. In the spectacle of death, still more in the struggles of an expiring creature, even though it be but a dumb brute, there is something that never fails to excite commiseration, mingled with a feeling of awe.

This last had come over her as she drew near the spot over which the birds were hovering.

It had not occurred to her that the object of their presence might be a human being, though it was a remembrance of this kind that was causing her to ride forward so slowly and reflectively. Once in her life, with others around her who were near and dear, had she been the object of eager solicitude to a flock of vultures.

Not the slightest thought of its being a human creature that caused their gathering now, there upon the Staked Plain, so rarely trodden by human feet, and even shunned by almost every species of animal.

As she drew still nearer, a black figure, dimly outlined against the dark-green leaves of the yucca, upon scrutiny, betrayed the form of a bird itself—a vulture. It was dead, hanging half-impaled upon the sharp spikes of the plant, as if it had been hung there or fallen from above.

A smile curled upon the lips of the fair equestrienne as she saw it.

“So, Lolita,” she said, bringing the mare to a stand, and half turning her, “I’ve been losing my time, and you your labor. The abominable bird—it’s only one of themselves that has fallen.”

The blood-hounds, that had fallen behind in her gallop across the plain, had now got up, and, instead of stopping by the tail of Lolita, rushed on toward the yucca. It was not the odor of the dead buzzard—strong as that may have been—that attracted them on, but the scent of what was more congenial to their sanguinary instincts.

On arriving at the yucca, they were seen to run around to the opposite side of the plant, and then to leap back, as if something standing on the defensive had suddenly held them at bay.

“A wounded wolf or antelope,” was the muttered reflection of their mistress.

It had scarcely passed her lips when she was made aware of her mistake. Above the continued growling of the hounds she could distinguish the tones of a human voice, and, the instant after, a man’s head and hand appeared above the spikes of the plant, the latter clutching the handle of a long-bladed and bloody knife, with which the blood-hounds were being kept at bay.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"DOWN, DOGS!"

Notwithstanding her apparent calmness and the presence of mind she evidently possessed, the rider of Lolita was affrighted—far more than the vultures that had soared higher out of sight and hearing of the fracas.

And no wonder that she was, at an apparition so strange and unexpected. The head of a man, with dark beard upon his face, holding in his hand a blade that showed blood upon it. This in such a place?

Her first thought was to turn Lolita's head and gallop off from the spot, when a reflection staid her. The man was evidently alive, and the look upon his face was not that of villainy or anger. The color of the skin and the beard bespoke him a white man, and not an Indian. Besides, there was pallor upon his cheeks—a wan, wasted look, that told suffering, not sin.

All this the quick eye of the huntress took in at a glance, resolving her how to act. Instead of galloping away, she spurred the mustang on toward the yucca. When close up to it, she threw herself out of the saddle, and, whip in hand, rushed up to the hounds, chiding and chastising them.

"Down, dogs! Down, you ugly brutes!" she exclaimed, giving each a sharp cut that at once reduced them to quiescence, causing them to cower at her feet. "Don't you see the mistake you have made?" she went on, addressing the dogs. "Don't you see that the cavalero is not an Indian? It is well, sir," she added, now turning to the man, "that your skin *is* white. Had it been copper-colored, I'm not certain I could have saved you from getting torn. My pets here are not partial to the Indians."

During these speeches and the actions that accompanied them, Frank Hamersley—for it was he—stood in staring and silent wonder.

What saw he before him?

Two large and fierce-looking dogs, a horse oddly caparisoned, a young girl, scarcely a woman, strangely and picturesquely garbed. What had he heard? First, the loud baying of blood-hounds threatening to tear him to pieces; then a voice sweet and musical as the warbling of a bird.

Was it all a dream?

Dreaming he had been when aroused by the growling of the hounds. But that was a horrid vision. What he now saw was the opposite. Demons had been assaulting him in his sleep. Now, awake, an *angel* appeared by his side!

The young girl had ceased speaking ere the vertigo caused by his sudden uprising cleared away from his

brain and he began to believe in the reality of the objects around him.

The shock of surprise had imparted a momentary strength. That soon passed, and his feebleness once more returning, he would have fallen back to the earth had he not clutched at the yucca, whose stiff blades sustained him.

"Oh, Heaven!" exclaimed the girl, now more clearly perceiving his condition. "You are suffering, sir! Is it hunger? Is it thirst? You have been lost upon the Staked Plain!"

"Hunger, thirst—both, *senorita*," said Hamersley, now speaking for the first time. "For days I have not had either food or drink."

The huntress uttered an exclamation of wonder, hastened toward her horse, and jerking a little wallet from the horn of her saddle, along with a suspended gourd, came instantly back again.

"Here, *senor*," she said, plunging her hand into the bag and bringing forth some small crackers; "there is all I have, for I've been all day from home, and the rest is eaten. Here, take the water first. No doubt you need drink most."

As she spoke she handed him the gourd, which, by its weight, contained over a pint.

"Am I not robbing you?" asked Hamersley, as he cast a significant glance out over the wide, sterile plain.

"No, no. I am not in need; besides, have not a great

way to go to where I can get supplied again. Drink, senor—drink all."

In six seconds after the calabash was empty.

"Now eat the crackers; they will strengthen you."

Her words proved true, for after swallowing a few morsels his strength revived.

"Do you think you would be able to ride, senor?" she asked.

"I think I could walk, though perhaps not very far."

"If you can ride, there is no need for your walking. You can mount my mare. I shall go afoot. It is not far—only three miles."

"But, senorita," hesitated Hamersley, "I must not leave this spot."

"Indeed!" she exclaimed, turning upon him a look of surprise. "For what reason, senor? To stay here would be to perish. You have no companion to assist you."

"I have a companion. That is why I must remain here. He has gone off in search of water."

"But why should you stay for him?"

"Need you ask, senorita? He is my comrade, true and faithful. He has been the sharer of my dangers—of late no common ones. If he were to come back here and find me gone——"

"What would that signify? He will know where to go after you."

"How?"

"Oh, that will be easy enough. Leave it to me. Are you sure he can find the way back to this place?"

"Quite sure. This yucca will guide him. He noted it before leaving."

"In that case, senor, there can be no reason for your remaining. On the contrary, I see that you need better care than you could have among the sage plants. I know one who can give it. Come with me, cavallero, and before your comrade can get back, I shall send one to meet him. Lest he should return before my messenger arrive, this will save him from going astray."

As she spoke she drew forth a piece of paper from beneath her velvet vest, and along with it a pencil. She was about to write upon it, when a thought restrained her.

"Does your comrade understand Spanish?" she asked.

"Only a word or two. He speaks English."

"Can he read?"

"Indifferently. Enough I suppose for——"

"Senor," she said, interrupting him, "I need not ask if you can write. Take this, and communicate with your friend. Say you are gone south—due south to a distance of about three miles. Tell him to stay here, and some one will come on to meet and guide him to where you will be found."

Hamersley perceived the rationality of the instructions. There was no reason why he should not do as desired, and

at once go with her who gave them. By staying some mischance might still happen, and he might never see his strange rescuer again. Who could tell what would arise in the midst of that mysterious desert? By going he would the sooner be able to send succor to his comrade.

He hesitated no longer, but wrote upon the piece of paper, in large, carefully inscribed letters, so that the ranger should have no difficulty in deciphering them :

"Saved by an angel ! Strike due south. Three miles from here you will find me. There is a horse, and you can follow his tracks. If you stay here for a time one will come to guide you."

The huntress took the paper from his hand, and glancing at the writing as if out of curiosity to scan the script of a language unknown to her. But something like a smile playing round her lips might have led one to believe that she had divined the meaning of the opening sentence. She made no remark, but stepping forward to the yucca, and reaching up, she impaled the piece of paper on its topmost spike.

"Now, senor," she said, "you will mount my mare. See, she stands ready for you."

Hamersley protested, saying he could walk well enough, though his tottering steps contradicted him. He urged his objections in vain.

The young girl appealingly persisted, until at length, for once in his life, his gallantry had to give way, and he climbed reluctantly into the saddle.

"Now, Lolita," said her mistress, "see that your step is sure, or you sha'n't have the nuts I promised you."

Saying this she stepped through the sage, the mustang keeping by her side, and the two great hounds, like a rear-guard, bringing up at some distance behind.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN OASIS.

Frank Hamersley rode on, wondering at his strange guide. Such a lovely being encountered in such an out-of-the-way corner of the world, in the midst of a treeless, waterless desert, over a hundred miles from the nearest civilized world.

Who was she? Where had she come from? Whither was she conducting him?

To the last question he would soon have an answer, for, as they advanced, she now and again spoke words to encourage him, telling him they would shortly arrive at a place of rest.

“Yonder!” she at length exclaimed, pointing to two mound-shaped elevations that rose, twin-like, above the level of the plain. “Between them lies our path. Once there, we shall not have much farther to go. The ranch will be in sight.”

The young prairie-merchant made no reply. He only thought of how strange it all was—the beautiful being by his side, her dash, her wonderful knowledge, exhibited with such an unpretending air, her generous behavior, the picturesqueness of her dress, her hunter equipments, the great dogs trotting at her heels, the dead game on the

croup behind him, the animal he bestrode—all were before his mind and mingling in his thoughts, like the unreal phantasmagoria of a dream.

And not any more like reality was the scene disclosed to his view when, after passing around the nearest of the twin, mound-shaped hills, and entering a gate-like gorge that opened between them, he saw before him and below, hundreds of feet below, a valley of elliptical form, like a vast basin scooped out from the plain. But for its oval shape he might have deemed it the crater of some extinct volcano. And then where was the lava that should have been projected from it? With the exception of the two hillocks on each hand, all the country around, far as the eye could reach, was level as the bosom of a placid lake.

And like anything but a crater was the cavity itself. No gloom down there, no returning streams of lava nor debris of pumice stone; but, on the contrary, a smiling vegetation—trees with foliage of different shades of green, among which could be distinguished the frondage of the live-oak and pecan, the more brilliant verdure of the alamos, and the flower-loaded branches of the wild China tree.

In their midst was a glassy surface that told of a lake, with here and there a fleck of white foam, that spoke of cool cascades and cataracts. Near the lakelet, that showed in the center, a tiny column of blue smoke rising up over the tree-tops, indicated the presence of a dwelling, and, as they advanced a little farther into the gorge, the house itself could be descried.

In contrast with the dreary plain over which he had been so long toiling, to Hamersley it seemed a Paradise—worthy to be the home of the Peri who was conducting him to it. It resembled a landscape painted upon the concave sides of an oval-shaped basin, with the cloudless sky, like a vast cover of blue glass, arching above.

The scene seemed scarcely real; and once more the young prairie-merchant began to doubt the evidence of his senses.

His doubts were dispelled by that sweet voice breaking once more upon his ear.

“Come, cavallero, you see where you are going now. It is not far, but you will have to keep a firm seat in the saddle for the next hundred yards or so. There is a steep descent and a narrow pathway. Take good hold with your knees, and trust altogether to the mare. She knows the way well, and will bear you in safety. Won’t you, Lolita? You will.”

She said this as the mustang gave a soft whimper, as if answering her interrogatory.

“Well, I will myself go before. So leave Lolita to herself, *senor*.”

On giving this injunction, she turned abruptly to the right, where a path that seemed almost perpendicular led along a ledge traversing the face of the cliff.

Still close followed by the mustang, she advanced fearlessly along it.

It seemed a most dangerous descent, even for one afoot,

and if left to his own will, Hamersley would have declined to attempt it on horseback.

But he had no choice now, for, before he could have made either expostulation or protest, Lolita had struck out along the ledge, and was hastening on, her hind-quarters high up in the air, and her neck extended in the opposite direction, as if standing upon her head.

To her rider there was no alternative but do as he had been directed—stick to the saddle. This he did by throwing his feet forward and his back flat along the croup, till his shoulders rested on the crossed hoofs of the prong-horns.

In this position he remained without saying a word, or even daring to look below, till he at length found himself moving forward with his face upturned to the sky, and thus discovered that the animal he bestrode was once more progressing in a horizontal direction.

“Now, senor,” said the voice of Lolita’s mistress, “you can sit upright—the danger is past. You have behaved well, Lolita,” she added, patting the mare upon the neck.

Once more stepping to the front, she struck off among the trees, along a path which still inclined downward, though only in a gentle slope.

Hamersley’s brain was in a whirl. The strange scenes, things, thoughts, and fancies were weaving weird spells around him, and once more he began to think that his senses either had or were forsaking him.

This time it was so, for the long-protracted suffering,

the waste of blood, and loss of strength, only spasmodically resuscitated by the excitement of the strange encounter, was now being followed by a fever of the brain that was in reality depriving him of his reason.

He remembered riding on for some distance farther, under trees whose leafy boughs formed an arcade over his head, shutting out the sun, and then all around became suddenly illuminated, as the mustang bore him out into the opening, with what appeared a log-cabin in the center. He saw, or fancied he saw, several men by its door, and, as the mare came to a stop in their midst, his fair conductor turned toward him suddenly, exclaiming:

“Oh, Heaven! Gone! gone! Lay hold of him, brother!”

Then one of the bystanders sprang forward, but whether to be kind or to kill he could not tell, for, before the man had laid hand on him, the strange tableau faded from his sight, and death, with all its dark obliviousness seemed to take possession of his soul.

CHAPTER XX.

A COMRADE "GONE UNDER."

The shadow of Walt Wilder was again cast over the Staked Plain, and to a gigantic length, but this time westwardly, from a sun that was rising instead of setting.

It was the morning after he had parted with his disabled companion, and he was now making back toward the spot where he had left him, the sun's disk just showing above the horizon of the plain and shining straight upon his back. There it illuminated an object not seen before, and which gave to Walt's shadow a shape still more weird and fantastic. It was now that of a giant with something sticking out on each side of his head that resembled a pair of horns, or as if his neck was embraced by an ox-yoke, the tines of which projected diagonally outward.

On looking at Walt himself, the singularity was at once understood. The carcass of a deer lay transversely across his back, the legs of the animal being fastened together so as to form a sling, through which he had thrust his head, leaving the long, slender shanks, like the ends of the letter X, slanting out on each side of his chin, and rising above his shoulders.

Despite the load thus borne by him, the step of the ex-

ranger was no longer that of a man either despairing or fatigued. On the contrary, it was light and elastic, while his countenance looked gay and joyous as the beams of the ascending sun. His very shadow seemed to flit over the frosted foliage of artemisias as lightly as the figure of a gossamer-robed belle gliding across the floor of a ball-room.

Walt Wilder no longer hungered or thirsted. Though the carcass on his back was still unskinned, a huge collop cut out of one of its hind-quarters showed he had satisfied the first craving; while the gurgle of water heard inside the tiny canteen hanging under his arm proclaimed that the second had been also appeased. He was now hastening on to the relief of his comrade, happy in the thought of being able soon to release him from his sufferings.

Striding lightly among the sage-brush, and looking ahead for the landmark that was to guide him, he at length came in sight of it. The palmetto, rising like a huge porcupine above the plain, could not be mistaken, and he saw it at more than a mile's distance, although the shadow of his head was already flickering among its bayonet-like blades.

At that moment something else came before his eyes that changed the expression upon his countenance. From gay it became grave, serious, apprehensive. A flock of buzzards, seemingly scared by his shadow, had suddenly flopped up from among the sage plants, and were now soaring around close to the tops of the palmetto.

They had evidently been upon the ground; what could they have been doing there?

It was this question, mentally put by Walt Wilder, that had caused the quick change in his countenance—a change from gay thought to painful conjecture.

"Merciful Heaven!" he exclaimed, suddenly making halt, his rifle almost dropping from his grasp. "Kin it be possible? Frank Hamersley gone dead! Them buzzarts! They've been upon the groun' to a sartinty. Durnashun! what ked they a been doin' down thar, right by the bunch o' palmetto, jest wher I left him? An' no sign o' himself to be seen! Merciful Heaven! Kin it be possyble?"

He remained for awhile silent and motionless, as if paralyzed by apprehension, mechanically scanning the yucca, as though from it he expected an answer to his interrogatory.

"It *air* possyble," he continued, after a time—"too possyble, too likesome. He war well-nigh done up, poor ellow; an' no wonder. Whar is he now? He must be down by the side o' the bush—down an' dead. If he war alive, he'd be lookin' out for me. By the eternal! he's gone under, an' this deer-meat, this water, procured to no purpose. I mout as well throw both away; they've come too late."

Once more resuming his forward stride, he advanced toward the dark mass above which the vultures were soaring. His shadow, still by a long distance preceding him, had frightened the birds higher up into the air, but they

showed no signs of going altogether away. On the contrary, they kept circling around, as if they had already commenced a repast, and although driven away, intended to return to it. On what had they been banqueting? On the body of his comrade? What else could be there?

The ex-ranger was still advancing, his heart agonized with apprehension, when his eye alighted on the piece of paper impaled upon the topmost spike of the yucca plant. It gave him relief, but only for an instant, his conjectures again leading him astray.

"Poor young fellow!" was the half-spoken reflection. "He's wrote somethin' to tell me how he died—and mayhap somethin' for me to carry back to the dear un's he's left behint in ole Kentuck. Wal, thet thing shall sartintly be done, ef ever this chile sets in the States agin. Durnation! Only to think how near I wer to save him—a whole doe-deer, an' water enough to have drowned him! Ye may lie thar, ye useless venison. I don't care no more to put tooth into ye. Frank Hamersley gone under! The man o' all others I'd a died to keep alive. I'd jest as soon lie down *now*, an' stop breathin' by the side o' him."

While speaking he had flung the deer's carcass to the ground and stalked on, leaving it behind him. A few strides brought him so near to the yucca that he could see the ground surface by its base. There was something black among the stems of the sage bushes. It was not the dead body of a man, but a buzzard, which he knew to be that he had shot before starting off. The sight of it caused

him again to make a stop. It looked draggled and torn, as if partially dismembered.

"Kin he hev been eatin' it? Or war it themselves, the cussed kannyballs! Poor Frank! I reck'n I'll find him on t'other side, lookin' mangled in the same way. Durn it! 'twar kewrious, too. 'Twar on this side he laid down to git shade from the sun. I seed him squat while I war walkin' away. The sun ain't hot enuf yit to a draw him to westart o' the bush, tho' ther far sartin he must be. What's the use o' my stannin' shillyshally hyar? I may as well face the sight at oncest, ugly as I know it'll prove. Hyar goes!"

Steeling himself for the terrible spectacle which he believed was certainly awaiting him, he once more advanced toward the yucca.

A dozen strides brought him up, and less than half a dozen more carried him around it. No body, living or dead; no remains of one, mutilated or dead!

Horse tracks—he saw these at a glance—and other signs that told of the late presence of human beings upon the spot—at least one other besides the comrade he had believed to be dead.

No proof yet that he was not dead; only the glimmer of a hope.

And now he reached out with his long arm and eagerly clutched the piece of paper, hitherto untouched. He had believed it but a dying record—a chapter of directions to be read after death.

His huge hands trembled and his whole frame quivered as he held the sheet spread open between them.

"Saved by an angel!"

He read no farther until after giving utterance to a "hoorah" that might have been heard many miles over the Staked Plain.

Then, more tranquillized, he continued deciphering the chirography of his comrade to the end, when a second shout terminated the orthographic effort.

"Saved by an angel!" he went on, muttering to himself. "A angel on the Staked Plain! Whar ked the critter hev come from? No matter whar, thar's been one hyar for sartint. Durn me, ef I don't smell the sweet o' her wings now. This piece o' paper! 'Tain't Frank's. I don't know's he hed a scrap about him. No. Thar's the scent o' a woman about it, sure; and whar thar's a woman, Frank Hamersley ain't likely to be let die o' starvation. I reckon it's all right now, an' thar ain't so much need to be in a hurry. 'Twar a putty quick brackfast I hed, an' hain't give this chile's stumuk full saterfakshun. I'll jest chaw another piece o' the deer meat, to strenthin me for the three-mile tramp southart."

In less than five minutes after, the smoke from a sage-stalk fire was seen ascending from beside the palmetto. In its blaze, quickly kindled, a huge piece of venison, cut from the fat buttocks of the doe, weighing at least four pounds, spiked upon one of the stiff blades of the plant, was rapidly turning from red to brown.

It was not long before the meat was removed from the spit, nor indeed very long till it had altogether disappeared from the scene, followed by a gurgling sound, as half the contents of the canteen went washing down his throat.

"Now," he said, springing to his feet, after he had completed his repast, "this chile feels strong enuf to face Satan hiself, an' tharfore needn't a be back'ard 'bout the encounterin' o' a angel. So hyar goes to find out Frank Hamersley an' how *he's* farin'. Anyhow, I'll take the deer along, in case thar mout be a scurcity o' eetables, tho' I reck'n thar's no fear o' that. Whar a angel makes dwellin' place, thar oughter be a full crib; tho' it mout be ambrosya, or nektur, or some o' lixir fixins as a puraira-man's appetyte ain't used to. Anyways, a bit o' doe deer-meat won't do any harm."

Once more shouldering the carcass, he strode off toward the south, partly guiding himself by the sun, but more by the tracks of the mustang, which, though scarcely distinguishable under the overshadowing sage plants, were seen with little difficulty by an eye experienced as his.

On went he, now and then muttering to himself words of wonder as to what sort of a woman had carried off his comrade; for, with all his jocular soliloquizing, he knew the "angel" to be a woman.

On went he, his gigantic shadow no longer preceding him, but keeping step and step by his side.

CHAPTER XXI.

A SWEET AWAKENING.

The young prairie-merchant became conscious that he existed by hearing voices. They were the voices of men—two of them—and were engaged in a conversation that appeared to be carried on with some difficulty, as one was speaking English, which the other only slightly understood. Nor was the English of the first speaker of a very pure kind, but sounded in Hamersley's ear sweeter than song itself, for he recognized the voice as that of Walt Wilder.

A joyful pulsation passed through his heart to know that his comrade had rejoined him. After their parting on the plain he had fears that they might never come together again.

Walt was not within sight, for the conversation was carried on outside the room. He saw that he was in a room, a small apartment, of which the walls were logs, and the furniture fashioned in a style of corresponding rudeness.

He was lying upon a camp-bedstead, rendered soft by a mattress of grizzly bear-skins, while a large blanket of bright-colored pattern was spread over him.

In the room was a slab-table of the rudest construction,

and one or two chairs, evidently made by the hand of the same unskillful workman, their seats being simply antelope skins with the hair on. On the table was a cup with a spoon in it, and two or three small bottles that had the look of containing medicine.

All these objects came under his eyes at the first dim glance, but, as his sight became clearer, and he felt strength enough to raise his head from the pillow, other articles were disclosed to his view in strange contrast with the chattels first observed.

Against the wall were several articles of female dress, all of a costly kind. They were silks and silk velvets, richly brocaded, while on another table, rough as the first, he could distinguish the articles usually belonging to a lady's toilet. These lay in front of a small mirror, set in a frame that appeared to be silver, while above was suspended a beautiful guitar.

He saw all these things with a half-bewildered gaze, for his senses were still far from being clear. The articles of female apparel and toilet, with the guitar, would all have been appropriate in a lady's boudoir or bedroom. How singular to see them in juxtaposition with the rough, unhewn logs of what was evidently an humble shanty or cabin!

Of course, he connected them with her—that singular being who had succored and perhaps saved his life. He could have no other conjecture. He remembered seeing a cabin as they approached it outside. It must be that he

was now in it, though from the last conscious thought as he dropped fainting in the saddle, all had been a blank between—as if he had been lying helpless in his tomb.

Even yet it might have appeared a dream, but for the voice of Walt Wilder, who was laboring hard to make himself understood by the personage outside.

Hamersley was about to utter a cry that would summon his comrade to his side, when he perceived that the voices were becoming fainter, as if the two speakers had stepped outside the house, and were strolling away from it. Feeling too weak even for the exertion of a shout, he remained silent, presuming they would soon return.

It was broad daylight, the sun glancing in through an open space in the wooden wall that served for a window. There was neither frame nor glass, and along with the bright beams there came in a delicious fragrance of flowers, among which he could distinguish the aromatic scent of the sassafras laurel and the wild China tree. There were voices of birds mingling their music with the sound of falling water—very different from the desert in which he had been so long struggling.

He lay thinking of the beautiful being who had brought him there, weaving conjectures that might explain the strangeness of the situation.

He could not tell how long he had been unconscious, nor had the whole period of it been like death, unless death have its dreams; for he had these, all of them with

the same form and face flitting and hovering near, as if she had been an angelic guardian.

A strange circumstance was that the face seemed *familiar* to him ; or, if not familiar, one he had looked upon before. He endeavored to recall all those he had seen in New Mexico during his visit to it, for if seen anywhere, it must have been there and then. His female acquaintances had been but few in that strange land. He could remember every one of them. She was not of their number. If he had ever looked upon that face, before seeing it upon the desert plain, it must have been while passing along the street of a Mexican city. And this could scarcely be, was his silent reflection, for once seen, even but for a moment, it could never be forgotten.

Still feeble as a child, the effort of thought fatigued him ; and this, with the narcotic influence of the flower-perfumes, the songs of the birds, and the soothing monotone of the waters, produced a drowsiness that terminated in sleep. It was his first real sleep since the hour of unconsciousness, and this time he slumbered without dreaming.

How long, he could not tell ; but again was he awakened by voices—as before, of two individuals engaged in conversation, but far different from those he had lately heard.

The bird-music, still pouring in through the window, was not sweeter than the tones that now saluted his ear.

Again the speakers were visible outside the room, but

he could tell they were near the door, and the first words heard admonished him of their design to enter.

“Come, Conchita, bring the wine along with you. You remember Don Prospero said we must give it to him at this hour.”

“Senorita, I have it here, ready.”

“You have forgotten the glass. You would not have him drink out of the bottle?”

“How thoughtless I am!” responded Conchita, apparently running back and possessing herself of the required article.

“Sh!” continued the other voice. “If he be still asleep, we must not awaken him. Don Prospero said that. Step lightly, girl.”

Hamersley was awake, with his eyes wide open, and his consciousness quite restored. But in that moment something, he could scarcely have told what, caused him to counterfeit sleep, and he lay still with shut eyelids.

He could hear the door turning upon its hinges of raw-hide, the soft rustle of robes—he could feel around him that inexpressible something that denotes the sweet presence of woman.

“Yes, he is asleep,” said the first speaker. “For the world we must not disturb him. We must wait till he awakes. Don Prospero left that direction, did he not?”

“He did, senorita.”

“Well, we must do exactly as he said, for you know, Conchita, this gentleman has been in great danger.

Thanks to the good Virgin, he will get over it. Don Prospero is sure of it."

"What a pity if he should not! Oh! senorita, isn't he——"

"Isn't he what?"

"So handsome, so very, very *beautiful*? He looks like a picture I've seen in church of an angel, only that the angel had wings and no mustaches."

"Hush, girl! Don't speak in that way, or I shall be angry with you. You may take back the wine. We must come again when he awakes. Tread lightly."

Again there was the swishing of drapery, but this time as if only one of the speakers was in motion. The other seemed still to linger by the side of the couch.

The invalid knew which it was. There was an electricity that told him; and for an instant he thought of opening his eyes and proclaiming that he was awake. A thought restrained him—delicacy. The lady might believe that he was awake and overheard the conversation. It was in Spanish, but she knew that he understood it, for he had no doubt that the "senorita" was she who had conducted him thither.

He remained without moving, without unclosing his eyes. But his ears were open, and he heard what gave him more joy, and, perhaps, more strength, than any potion Don Prospero could have prescribed, or Conchita administered.

It came in the shape of a soliloquy—only a few words softly spoken, and not intended to be heard.

“It is true what Conchita says, and what Valerian told me. He is indeed beautiful!”

The drapery again rustled, and the door wheezed upon its hinges, opening and closing.

But before it had quite shut to, it was once more pushed open, the invalid having signified by a cough that sleep had forsaken him.

CHAPTER XXII.

DON VALERIAN.

Hamersley, with head upraised upon the pillow, looked eagerly toward the re-opening door. He saw what he had been expecting—what he had seen in fancy throughout his long, fevered dream; the fair form and beautiful face that had so much interested, charmed him, even in the hour when life seemed to be forsaking him.

There was a red tinge upon the cheek that appeared to have flashed up suddenly, as if she had half suspected that her soliloquy had been overheard. She had spoken it the instant before. The words had but parted from her lips, and the thought was yet thrilling her heart. Could he have heard her? He showed no sign.

She approached the couch with a look of solicitude, mingled with interrogation.

A hand was held out to her, and a word spoken that told her she was recognized. Her eyes sparkled with joy as she saw in those of the invalid that reason had once more become seated upon its throne.

“I am so happy,” she said—“we are all so happy to know you are out of danger. Don Prospero has told us so. You will now get well in a very short time. But I

forget. We were to give you something as soon as you should awake. It is only our Mexican wine. Conchita, bring it in."

Conchita had followed her mistress into the chamber. A glance would have told her to be the maid, if the overheard conversation had not already disclosed it. A little brown-skinned damsel, less than five feet in height, with raven hair hanging in double plaits behind her back, and black eyes that sparkled like those of a basilisk.

Conchita, provident, had brought the bottle and glass along with her; and soon a portion of the famed grape-juice of El Paso was swallowed by the invalid.

"How kind you have been," he said, as his head once more settled down upon the pillow; "how very kind of you, *senorita*."

"Do not speak of any kindness," she rejoined. "There has been no kindness in particular. You would not have had me leave a fellow-creature to perish on the plain?"

"Ah, true; I remember all. But for you, I suppose I should now have been in another world."

"No, indeed; there you are mistaken. If I had never come near you, you would have been saved all the same. Know, *senor*, that I have good news for you. Your comrade is safe, and here. He arrived next morning, at an early hour, with a deer upon his shoulders. And he had found water, too; so that you see I have no merit for having rescued you. But I shall bring him in, and Don Prospero, whom I hear talking outside. Don Prospero is

a good surgeon, and has well attended to your wounds. He has given instructions for you to be kept quiet, so please do not excite yourself by trying to talk. I shall bring him in at once. Now that you are awake, it may be necessary he should see you."

Without waiting for a reply, she glided out of the room, Conchita having gone before.

Hamersley lay pondering upon what he had just heard, more especially on that he had overheard—the sweet soliloquy. Few men are insensible to flattery; and flattery from such lips! He must be near death, indeed, whose heart's pulsations it would not have affected.

The young Kentuckian was not going to die, there or then. He knew he was not. He felt enfeebled, but that was only from the loss of the blood spilled copiously out of his veins. For such a woman's sake he could recover from a worse wound than that he had received. He would be sure to get well again.

But Don Prospero! Who and what was he like? Was he the owner of the voice he had heard in dialogue with Walt Wilder? Might he be the owner of *all*? The thought troubled him.

Approaching footsteps outside put a stop to his conjectures. There were voices, too—one of them that had sounded so sweetly in his ears. The other was a man's, though not the same he had heard making such terrible attempts to be understood by Walt, nor was it that of the ex-ranger himself. It was the voice of Don Prospero,

who soon after entered the room, the senitora leading the way.

A man of nigh sixty years of age, spare form and face, hair grizzled, cheeks wrinkled; withal hale and hearty, as could be seen by the pleasant sparkle of his eye; dressed in a semi-military suit, of a subdued tint that spoke of the medical staff.

At a glance there was no danger in Don Prospero. Hamersley felt relieved.

"Glad to see you looking so well," said the old gentleman, laying hold of his patient's hand to feel his pulse. "Ah! much more regular; it will be all right now. Keep quiet, and we shall soon get you on your feet again."

"Don Prospero," asked the senorita, who now, no longer wearing her huntress garb, moved about the room with all the grace of a silken-clad lady, "I suppose he may see his friend, and also Valerian?"

"Oh, certainly; there is no longer any danger. A little more of the grape-juice will do him no harm. Nothing like our native wine, senor, for bringing a sick man back to his appetite. After that we shall give you some wild-turkey broth, and a bone to pick. You'll soon be able for both."

"Then I shall call them in," said the senitora, meaning Walt Wilder and Valerian, as she spoke gliding from the room, and leaving Don Prospero with her patient.

Soon after her sweet voice was heard calling outside: "Valerian!"

“Who is Valerian?” feebly interrogated the invalid.

Again the name of a man was making him unhappy.

“Don Valerian!” repeated the old surgeon, in a tone that told of respect for the individual so designated. “You shall see, senor. You shall soon make his acquaintance. No; I am wrong about that. You cannot now.”

“But why? You have given permission for him to see me.”

“And so he shall, and you him. There! you see him now.”

This was said as a tall, elegant man, under thirty years of age, stepped inside the chamber, while a still taller form appeared in the door-way, filling up the space between the two posts. The latter was Walt Wilder; the former, Valerian.

“Colonel Miranda!” cried Hamersley, starting up on his couch. “Colonel Miranda, is it you?”

“It is, my dear friend—myself, as you see; and I need not tell you how glad I am to meet you again. How unexpected, in this queer quarter, where I little hoped to have the pleasure of entertaining an old friend. Our worthy physician here tells me you will soon get strong again, and be somewhat more of a tax upon my hospitality than you have yet been. No doubt, after your very protracted fast, you will have the appetite of an ostrich. Well, in one way that will be fortunate, since here we are living, as you may see, in a somewhat uncivilized fashion. *Carrambo!* You will be deeming my

manners quite as rude as our surroundings, for I am forgetting to introduce to you one of whom you have often heard me speak ; though it doesn't so much signify, I suppose, since the lady has made your acquaintance already. Senor Don Francisco, permit me to present you to my sister, Adela."

It was the beautiful huntress who courtesied to this name, and Hamersley now remembered the portrait on the wall of the parlor in Colonel Miranda's house.

He had already dismissed his suspicious fears of Don Prospero. He now no longer dreaded Valerian.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LAND OF THE LEX TALIONIS.

During the quarter of a century preceding the annexation of New Mexico to the United States, that distant province of the Mexican Republic, like all the rest of the country, was the scene of constantly recurring revolutions. Every discontented captain, colonel, or general, who chanced to be in command of a district, there held sway as a dictator, and so demeaned himself that martial and military rule had become established as the living law of the land.

The civic authorities rarely possessed more than the semblance of power, and where they did, it was wielded in the most flagitious manner. The most arbitrary acts were committed under the pretext of patriotism or duty. No man's life was safe who fell under the displeasure of the ruling military chieftain, and woman's honor was held in but slight respect.

In the northern frontier provinces of the Republic this irresponsible power of the military was peculiarly despotic and harassing. These two causes contributed to establish and keep it in the ascendancy. One was the revolutionary condition of the country, which, as elsewhere, had become chronic.

The contest between the party of the clergy and that of the patriots began on the first days of Mexican independence, and has been continued ever since.

The province of New Mexico, notwithstanding its remoteness from the nation's capital, was always affected by, and followed its political fortunes.

When the church party was in power at the capital, its adherents became the rulers in the distant States for the time being. And when the patriots or liberals gained the ascendancy, the rule was reversed. It is but just to say that when the latter were the "ins" things for a time went well. Corruption, though not cured, was to some extent checked, and good government would begin to extend itself over the land.

But this would only last for a brief period, until a revolutionary change of the government was affected by the opposing party. Then would come sanguinary scenes—hanging, shooting, garroting—all the horrors that result from bitter and despicable revenge.

In such an uncertain state of things, it was but natural that the military should feel themselves master of the situation, and act accordingly.

In the Northern States, however, they had yet another pretext for their unrestrained exercise of power, and in none more than New Mexico. This remote province, lying like an oasis in the midst of uninhabited wilds, was surrounded on all sides by tribes of hostile Indians. There were the Navajoes and Apaches on the west, the

Comanches and other Apache bands on the south and east, the Utahs on the north, and various smaller tribes distributed around it. They were all more or less hostile, at one time or another, now on terms of an intermittent peace, secured by a palaver and a treaty, anon to be broken by some act of bad faith, leaving their braves free once more to betake themselves to the war-path.

Of course, this condition of things gave the soldiery a fine opportunity to maintain their ascendancy over the peaceful citizens. Rabble as these soldiers were, and pal-troons as they generally proved in every encounter with the Indians, they were accustomed to proclaim themselves the country's protectors, and assumed the power to despoil it at their pleasure.

Some few years preceding the American-Mexican war—which, as all know, gave New Mexico to the United States—these belligerent swaggerers were in the zenith of their arbitrary rule. Their great patron and protector, Santa Anna, had enjoyed a long spell of power, making him absolute dictator of Mexico, and disposer of the destinies of its people. At the same time one of his most servile tools and successful imitators was at the head of the provincial government, having Santa Fe for its capital. This man was Manuel Armigo, whose character may be ascertained by those curious to study it, by reading the chronicles of the times, especially the records of the prairie-merchants, known as “Santa Fe traders.” It will here be learned that this Mexican despot was guilty of

every act that could disgrace humanity, and that not only did he oppress his fellow-citizens with the soldiery placed at his disposal and intended to protect them from Indian enemies, but he was actually in *secret league* with the Indians themselves to aid him in his plunders and murders. Whatever his eye coveted, he was sure to obtain by fair means or foul, by open pillage or secret theft, not unfrequently accompanied by assassination. And as with the despot himself, so with his subordinates, each in his own town or district wielding irresponsible power, and leading a life in imitation of the provincial chieftain—as of him their great prototype and protector, who held dictatorial sway in the central capital of the country—Don Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. A knowledge of this abnormal condition of Mexican affairs will in some measure explain the answer given by Colonel Miranda to his invalid guest, when the latter put the question :

“Why are you here?”

“As regards Don Prospero and myself, we are here *to save our heads*. As for my sister—but that I shall tell you in time. You wish to have the whole history?”

“I do. It seems so inexplicable—a mystery, in fact, to find you here in this oasis of the desert; and, as you say, it is living in such a primitive fashion. I’ve been puzzling my brains about it ever since they became clear enough to think.”

“Well, you shall have the puzzle solved. I’ve kept it from you by direction of our good physician, who feared

the tale might too much excite you. But you're now strong enough to hear it, and so listen."

It was on the third day after the recovery of his consciousness, the young Kentuckian still lying on the couch, and Miranda seated by his side, that this dialogue took place.

"One word," commenced the Mexican colonel. "One name will give you the key to the whole affair—a name, Don Francisco, already known to you."

"*Uraga!*" exclaimed Hamersley, the word rising mechanically from his lips, while a cloud came over his brow, and a red flush flecked the pallor upon his cheeks. "*Uraga, the scoundrel!* I was thinking so."

"Gil Uraga—no longer Captain Gil Uraga, but now colonel, commanding the district that six months ago was mine, and living in the house where twelve months ago I had the honor of showing you some little hospitality."

The young Kentuckian turned uneasily on his couch, his pale face becoming still further flushed with indignation.

"For the matter of our story," continued the Mexican, "it only needs to add that we are refugees, and then it is all told. But the details may be interesting to you, and also how and why we have sought an asylum here. It is something of a lengthy tale, Don Francisco, and, before going further, I think it would be better to strengthen you with another glass of wine. Before going out, the doctor left word for it to be given to you. Besides, I need one

myself, and that will be an excuse for my having it. The host should always drink with his guests."

With a smile, the Mexican rose from his chair and stepped out of the room to give directions about the wine.

Hamersley lay reflecting, longing to hear the details of the interrupted relation. He had his conjectures that in some of them at least he would feel a deep interest. He had not forgotten the conversation on the roof of Miranda's house, least of all, that portion of it in which allusion was made to Uraga, and his aspirings to the hand of a certain lady. It had pained him when he had only seen her portrait, and now that he had looked upon the original; now that——

Though tortured by suspense, and something of an undefinable fear, he remained silent, awaiting the return of Miranda.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE REFUGEES.

In due time Don Valerian re-entered the room, Conchita following with a flask of wine and drinking vessels for two. The sparkling beverage was soon quaffed, and the colonel commenced his narration.

“Not long after you left us, I made application to the government for an increase in the mounted force over which I had command. It had become necessary for the protection of the district from our warlike neighbors in the west—the Navajoes. They had made several raids upon the river settlements, and carried off goods, cattle, and a number of captives. I got the force I had made requisition for; but not the right men—or at least not the officers I should have chosen. A troop of cavalry was sent to me. You may imagine my chagrin, not to say disgust, when Captain Gil Uraga, at the head of his company of lancers, marched into the town of Albuquerque, and reported himself for duty. I need not tell you how unpleasant the association was for many reasons, not the least that of which I have already told you—his pretensions to the hand of my sister.”

Hamersley writhed upon his couch. Perhaps had the

doctor been present he would have caused the narration to be suspended.

Miranda went on :

“He continued his ill-received attentions whenever chance gave him an opportunity. It was not often—I took care of that; though but for precautions, and my authority as his superior officer, his advances would, no doubt, have been bolder—in short, persecutions. I knew that to my sister, as to myself, his presence—even in the district—was disagreeable; but there was no help for it. I could not have him removed. In all matters of military duty, he took care to act so that there should be no pretext for a charge against him. Besides, I soon found that he was in favor with some of the government authorities, though I did not then know why. I learned it afterward, and why he of all others should have been sent to Albuquerque. The sap had commenced for the new revolution, and he was one of its secret fomenters. He had been chosen by the church party as a fitting agent to act in the district of which, like myself, he was a native.

“Having no suspicion of this, I only thought of him in regard to his impertinent pretensions to my sister, and against these I could restrain him. He was polite, obsequiously so, and cautiously guarded in his gallantries, so that I could only wait and watch.

“The vigil was not a long one, though it ended differently from what I might have expected. About two months after his coming under my command, the late change of

government was proclaimed all over Mexico. One morning, as I went down to the military quarters, I found confusion and disturbance. The soldiers were under arms, many of them drunk, and vociferating: '*Viva Santa Anna! Viva el Coronel Uraga!*' At a glance I comprehended all. It was a *pronunciamento*. I drew my sword, thinking I might stay the tide of treason, and called around me such of my followers as were still faithful.

"It was too late. The poison had spread throughout the whole command. My adherents were soon overpowered—several of them killed—myself wounded, dragged to a temporary prison, and there locked up. The wonder is that I was not executed on the spot, for I know that Uraga thirsted for my life. He was only restrained, however, by a little caution; for, although I was not put to death on that day, he intended I should never see the sun rise upon another. But he was disappointed, and I escaped.

"I know you will be impatient to learn how," resumed the refugee, after rolling and igniting a fresh cigaritto. "It is somewhat of an incident, and might serve the writer of a romance. I owe my life, my liberty, and, what is more, my sister's safety, to our good friend, the doctor. In his capacity of military surgeon, he was not compromised like the rest of us, and, after the revolt, he was left free to follow his vocation. While seeking permission to dress the wound I had received, chance brought him into a position where he could overhear a conversation

that was being carried on between Uraga and one of his lieutenants—a ruffian named Roblez—fit associate for his superior. They were in high glee over what had happened, carousing, and, in their cups, not very cautious of what they said. Don Prospero heard enough to make him acquainted with their scheme—so diabolical you will scarce give credence to it. I was to be made away with in the night—carried up to the mountains, and there murdered. With no traces left, it would be supposed that I had made my escape from the prison; and the good doctor heard other designs equally atrocious—what the demon afterward intended doing when my sister should be left unprotected.”

Something like a groan escaped from the throat of the invalid, while his fingers clutched nervously at the blanket that covered the couch.

“Devoted to our family, Don Prospero at once determined upon a course of action. There was not a moment to be lost. He obtained the permission to attend to me in prison. It was a cheap grace on Uraga’s part, considering his ulterior design.

“An attendant—a sort of hospital assistant—was allowed to accompany the doctor to the cell, bearing his lints, drugs, and instruments. Fortunately, I had not yet been robbed by the ruffians who had imprisoned me; and in my own purse, along with that of Don Prospero, there was a considerable sum of gold—enough to tempt the attendant to exchange clothes and places with me. He was the more

ready to do so, relying upon a story he intended to tell—that we had overpowered and compelled him.

“Poor fellow! as we afterward learned, it did not save him. He was shot the next morning, to appease the chagrin of Uraga—raging furious at our escape. We cannot help feeling regret for his fate; but, under the circumstances, what else could have been done?

“We stepped forth from my place of confinement, the doctor leading the way, and I, his assistant, bearing his instruments and medicines after him. We passed out of the quarters unchallenged. Fortunately, the night was a dark one, and the guards were given to carousing. The sentries were more or less intoxicated.

“By stealth and in silence we hastened on to my house, where I found Adela, as you may suppose, in a state of agonized distress. But there was no time for words—not even of explanation. With two of my servants whom I could trust, we hastily collected some of our animals—horses and pack-mules. The latter we loaded with such things as we could think of as being requisite for a journey. We intended it to be a long one—all the way across the great prairies. I knew there would be no safety for us within the limits of New Mexico, and I remembered what you had said to me but a few months before—your kind proffer of hospitality, should it ever be my fate to seek refuge in your country; and to seek it we set forth, leaving my house untenanted, or only in charge of a few faithful domestics, from whom gold had gained a promise

not to betray us. Don Prospero, my sister, and myself, the two trusted peons, who had volunteered to accompany us, with the girl Conchita, composed our traveling party. I knew that we dare not take the route usually traveled—we should be followed by Uraga's troop and taken back, or slain in the pursuit. Instead, I made direct for the mountains, with whose passes I was acquainted, having traversed them in pursuit of the Apaches.

“We passed safely over the mountains, and kept on toward the Rio Pecos. Beyond this river all was unknown to us. We only knew that there lay the Staked Plain, invested with mysterious terrors—the themes of our childhood's fears—a vast, sterile tract, uninhabited, save with savages seeking scalps, with wild beasts greedy for blood, with hideous reptiles and serpents breathing poison. But what were all these dangers to that we were leaving behind? Nothing; and this thought inspired us to keep on. We crossed the Pecos, and entered upon the desert tract. We knew not how far it extended, only that on the other side lay a fertile country, through which we might hope to reach the frontier settlements of your great, free nation. It was the beacon of our hopes—the goal of our safety.

“We kept a due easterly course; but there were days when the sun was obscured by clouds, and then, unguided, we had either to remain at rest or travel by guess-work.

“We toiled on, growing weak for want of food, and

suffering terribly from thirst. No water was to be found anywhere—not a drop.

“Our animals suffered as ourselves. Staggering under the weight of their loads, one by one they gave out, falling down upon the desert plain. Only one held up bravely to the last—the mustang mare that brought you to our Lone Ranch.

“Yes; Lolita survived, to carry dear sister, as if she understood the value we all placed upon her precious burden. The others gave out—first the horses ridden by Don Prospero and myself; then the pack-mules. Fortunately, they fell near the spot where we at length found relief—near enough for their loads to be afterward recovered.

“One day, as we toiled on foot, in the hourly expectation of death, we came in sight of this fair valley. It appeared to us a Paradise, as you say it did to yourself. Under our eyes were green trees and the sheen of flowing waters; in our ears the songs of birds we had never expected to hear again. Chance had brought us direct to the path, and the only one by which it can be reached from the upper plain.

“Inspired by the promising landscape below, we had still strength enough to descend. We drank of the sweet water, and soon found food on the branches of the trees that shaded it. It was in a season when there were fruits and berries in abundance. Afterward we discovered game, and were successful in capturing it. With restored strength

we were able to go back and recover the goods we had left upon the plain, along with several of the mules that, after resting, had regained their feet, and could struggle on a little farther.

“At first we only thought of a temporary resting-place, though there seemed but slight hope of our being able to continue our journey. But as the days passed on and we were left undisturbed, we began to realize the fact that we had found a safe asylum. It was not likely that any one could know the route we had followed in our flight, and even the vengeance of Uragá could scarcely pursue us over the Staked Plain. In any case, there was no help for it but remain in the valley, the only alternative seeming to be our return to the Del Norte—of course not to be thought of. We resolved therefore on staying.

“We had conceived a plan for communicating with the outer settlements of New Mexico, and were not without hopes that, sooner or later, we might get news that would make it safe for us to return. In our country, as you know, there is nothing permanent; and we might expect, ere long, to see our party once more in power.

“Our resolution to remain here becoming fixed, we set about making our situation as comfortable as circumstances would permit. We built this humble dwelling, whose roof now shelters you. We turned fishermen, hunters—in this last specialty my sister becoming more skilled than any of us—a real huntress, as you, *senor*, have had occasion to perceive. We have enjoyed the life

amazingly, more especially our worthy physician, who is an enthusiastic naturalist, and here finds full scope for his studies. But we have not depended altogether upon the chase for our subsistence. Manuel, one of our servants, makes an occasional trip to the settlements—the route to which he had good reason to remember. He takes care to steer clear of Albuquerque, as also to make his approaches under cover of the night, and his marketing with circumspection. With our gold, not yet exhausted, he is enabled to purchase mules, and bring back such slight commodities as we stand in need of; while a friend, who knows of our situation, sends us the news. Now, Don Francisco, you know all.”

CHAPTER XXV.

CONVALESCENT.

Thanks to the skill of the old army surgeon, Hamersley's strength became rapidly recuperated. A tender, watchful nurse had perhaps something to do with his quick recovery, as also the restoration of his spirits. Long before he was convalescent he had ceased to lament the loss of his property and only felt sadness when he thought of his brave followers who had fallen in the endeavor to protect it from the savage pillagers. Day by day the retrospect of the red carnage lost something of its horrifying hues, the too vivid tints becoming gradually blended with thoughts more tranquil and beams more benignant.

They were not the beams of the sun, whose lucid light from a sapphire sky shone daily down at that sweet oasis of the desert—not these that were effecting the metamorphosis so soothing to his spirit, though in truth was it a lovely spot into which a chance, at first so sinister, but afterward so fortunate, had conducted him. The vale itself, with its soft clustering groves, exhibiting the varied foliage of evergreen oaks, pecan, and wild China trees; its arbors of wild plum, and terraced grape-vines; its rock-bound rivulet, here and there forming a tranquil sheet,

smooth as the surface of a mirror, there leaping off into the dance of the cascade like a string of merry maidens, with their white dresses floating behind them, offered to the eye an enchanting landscape.

Placed as it was in the midst of the brown, barren desert, strangely contrasting with the sterility around, it resembled some exquisitely painted picture set in plainest frame, a sparkling jeweled decoration upon a coat ragged and russet. In truth, a delectable spot, worthy to be the abode of an angel.

The young prairie-merchant could well fancy it to be so inhabited. So far from having changed his mind since he penned that word on the piece of paper left upon the palmetto, he was now only the more confirmed that he had written the truth. If Adela Miranda was not an angel she was a being of perhaps equally pleasant companionship—at least, so thought Frank Hamersley, before he had been ten days under the same roof with her.

Hers was a beauty of a rare and peculiar kind, not common anywhere, and only seen among the proud señoritas through whose veins courses the blue blood of Andalusia, a beauty that might perhaps rebel against the standard of taste set up in the icy northland. The dark tracery upon her lip might have looked a little odd in a ball-room amid Saxon belles, just as her sprightly and buoyant spirit might be repellent to the ideas of a strait-laced sect.

They had no such effect upon Frank Hamersley. On the contrary, to the young Kentuckian, the child of a

land above all others free from conventionalism—to a nature like his, attuned to the picturesque, these were but points to please, to pique the fancy and fix it. They had done this. Long before leaving his couch of convalescence there was but one world for him—that whose atmosphere was breathed by Adela Miranda, but one being in it—herself.

It must have been decreed by Heaven that these two hearts should come together. Else why in such a strange place brought into juxtaposition by such a singular contingency of circumstances!

Nothing seemed to stand between them now, not even the zealous watchfulness of a brother. Don Valerian appeared to neglect every thought of fraternal duty, if any such had ever occurred to him. His time was chiefly taken up in roving around the valley with Walt Wilder, or making more distant excursions in the companionship of the ex-ranger and hunter, who narrated to him many a strange chapter in the life-lore of the prairies.

When Walt was himself about the house he had something to occupy him—that which kept him from too frequently intruding upon his invalid comrade and the nurse who so carefully tended him. The giant had also succumbed to a similar fate. A pair of jet-black eyes, set in a countenance of olive hue, with a row of pearly teeth, and just a touch of damask-red blushing out upon the cheeks, had done the business for Walt. Such were the eyes, teeth, and complexion of Conchita, the little half-

Indian damsel who, long domesticated with the family of the Mirandas, had followed its fortunes into the heart of the Staked Plain.

Quite as little dreaded was the intrusion of Don Prospero. Absorbed in his favorite study of nature, the physician passed most of his hours in communion with her. More than half the day was he out of doors, chasing lizards into the crevices among the rocks, impaling insects on the spikes of the wild maguey plant, or plucking such flowers as seemed new to the classification of the botanist. In these tranquil pursuits, as Don Valerian had said, he was perhaps happier than all around—even those whose hearts throbbed with that supreme passion, now sweet and confiding, anon the very acme of bitterness.

As for the two Pueblo *peons*—Manuel and Chico—no one thought of them. Clothed in their coarse woollen garments, the humble garb of servitude, they went about their daily toil and tasks, when meeting their masters doffing their palm-plait hats, and making humblest obeisance.

One of these men—he who was called Manuel—showed at times a very different disposition. He possessed naturally a sinister, almost fierce cast of countenance, that at once challenged antipathy. Only a knowledge of the fidelity he had shown to Colonel Miranda and his sister could have hindered Don Valerian's guests from disliking him. He did not seem to like them, though there was no declared exhibition of it. That he would not have dared, however intense his hostility. But, although unobserved,

a strange fire might have been at times seen burning in his eyes—a fixed, steady spark, like that which gleams and glows in the orbs of a rattlesnake about to spring upon its prey. It was when his glance rested upon the girl Conchita, especially when he saw her in converse with the ex-ranger, listening too tenderly.

If in that remote spot there were loves refined and romantic as those felt by Romeo and Juliet, here was also a passion grotesque and terrible as that of Quasimodo.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A STRICKEN GIANT.

About a week after the young Kentuckian had risen from his invalid couch, and was able to be abroad, Walt Wilder, touching him on the sleeve, requested to have his company at a distance from the ranch.

Hamersley acceded to the request, though not without some wonderment. In the demeanor and movements of his comrade there was something odd, almost mysterious. As this was unusual, he had evidently some communication to make of a secret character, as also important.

Not until they had got well out of sight of the dwelling, and beyond ear-shot of any one inside or around it, did Walt say a word, and then only after they had come to a stop in the heart of a thick growth of hackberries, where a prostrate trunk offered them the accommodation of a seat.

Sitting down upon it, and motioning his companion—still with the same mysterious air—to do likewise, the ex-ranger at length began to unburden himself:

“Frank,” said he, “I’ve brought ye out hyar to hev a leetle spell o’ talk on a subjick as consarns this coon very consid’able.”

“What subject, Walt?”

“Wal, it’s about weemen.”

“Women? Why, Walt Wilder, I should have supposed that would be the farthest thing from your thoughts at such a time, and in such a place as this.”

“Wal, Frank, ef this child don’t misunderstan’ the sign, they ain’t the furrest thing from *yur* thoughts at this hyar time an’ place.”

The significance of his comrade’s remarks caused the color to spring up the cheeks of the young prairie-merchant—late a little pale. He stammered, as he made rejoinder:

“Well, Walt, you wish to have a talk about women. I’m curious to hear what you have to say of them. Go on; I’m listening.”

“Ye see, Frank, I’m in a sort o’ a quandary wi’ a petticoat, an’ I want a word o’ advice from ye. You’re more expurienced in thar ways than I am. Though a good score o’ years older than yursel, I hain’t hed much to do wi’ weemen; but now, ef Walt Wilder know anythin’ o’ the signs o’ bein’ in love, he hez goed a good ways along the trail. Yis, Frank, too fur to think o’ takin’ the back track.”

“On that trail, eh?”

“Thet same whar Cyubit sots his leetle feet, ’ithout ne’er a moccasin on ’em. Yis, kumrade, this child fur oncest in his kurreer air in difeequelty, sure, sartin.”

Hamersley gave a shrug of surprise, not unaccompanied with a slight feeling of uncertainty. Walt Wilder in love—

and so earnestly! With whom could it be? As he could himself think of only one woman worth falling in love with, either in that solitary spot, or anywhere on earth, it was but natural his thoughts should turn to her. Only for an instant, however. The thought of having the rough hunter for a rival was preposterous; and Walt, pursuing the topic, soon convinced him that he had no such lofty aspirations.

“Yis,” continued he, “she’s been an’ goed an’ did it—thet air girl Concheeter. Them black eyes o’ hern hev shot clur through this child’s huntin’-shirt, till thar’s no peace left the inside o’ it. I hain’t slep’ a soun’ wink fur more’n a week o’ nights, all the time dreemin’ o’ the gurl, as ef she war a angel a-hoverin’ above me. Now, Frank, what am I ter do? That’s why I’ve axed ye to kum out hyar an’ hev this confabershun.”

“Well, Walt, you shall be welcome to my advice. As to what you *should* do, that’s clear enough, but what you may or can do will depend as much upon Miss Conchita as yourself, perhaps a little more. Have you spoken to her upon the subject?”

“Thar ain’t yit been much talk atween us, i’deed not any talk, I mout say. Ye know I can’t parley thar lingo. But this child hev approached her wi’ as much skill as he iver did prong-horn or buffler. An’ ef sign signerfy anythin’, she wan’t bad skeert about it. Contrarywise, Frank, she sort o’ showed she’d be powerful willin’ to freeze to me.”

"If she be so disposed, there can't be much difficulty about the matter. You mean to marry her, I presume?"

"In coorse I duz; thet fur sartin. Ef this gur'll consent to be myen, I meen nothin' short o' the hon'rab'le saramony o' marriage—same as atween man an' wife. Now, Frank, what do ye think o't?"

"I think you might do worse than get married. You're old enough, Walt, and Conchita appears to be just the sort of girl that would suit you. I've heard it said that these Mexican women make the best of wives, when married to Americans."

Hamersley paused in his speech, as if the reflection was pleasant to him.

"There are several things," he continued, "that it will be necessary for you to arrange before you *can* bring about this happy conclusion. First, you will have to get the girl's consent; and I should think also that of Colonel Miranda and his sister. They are, as it were, her guardians, and, to a certain extent, responsible for her being properly bestowed. Last of all, you will have to obtain the sanction of the church. This, indeed, may be your greatest difficulty. To make you and your sweetheart one, a priest or a Protestant clergyman will be needed; and I should think neither could be had very conveniently here, in the heart of the Staked Plain."

"I tell ye, Frank Hamersley, I've made up my mind to hev her. Don't you think the ole doc ked perform the saramony? He air a sort o' a purfessional."

"No, no; the doctor would be of no use in that capacity. It's his business to unite broken joints, and not hands or hearts. But, Walt, if you are really determined on the thing, I think I can offer you a hope of being able to carry out your determination in a correct and legitimate manner. You must be patient, however, and consent to wait awhile."

"Gie us yar explanation, kumrade."

"Well, our host here, Colonel Miranda, has promised to return with us to the States. That must be after you and I have made our trip to New Mexico. Whether we be successful in getting trace of my lost property or not, we shall come back this way, and he will go with us across the plains. Of course, all the others, including your Conchita, will be of the party. Once in the United States, you and she can get tied to both your hearts' content—she by a priest, if she prefer it, and you by a Protestant clergyman."

"Dog-goned ef I care which!" was the ready rejoinder of the giant. "Eyther'll do. But harkee, kumrade!" he continued, his face assuming an astute expression. "I'd like to be sure o' the gurl now—that is, her way o' thinkin' on it. Fact is, I've made up my mind to be sure, so as thar kin be no slips or back-kicks."

"Sure, how?"

"By gettin' the gurl's promise."

"Oh, there can be no harm in that. I can see none."

"Wal, I'm glad you think so, for I've set my traps for

the thing, an' baited 'em, too. Thet air part o' my reesun for fetchin' you out hyar. She's gin me the promise o' a meetin' 'mong these hackberries, an' may show at any minnit. Ye see, Frank, I'm a-goin' to purpose to her, an' I want to do it in a reg'lar straightforrard way. As I can't talk thar lingo, an' you kin, I know'd you wudn't mind translatin' atween us. Ye won't, will ye?"

"I shall do so with the greatest of pleasure, if you wish it. But don't you think, Walt, you might learn what you want to know without any interpreter? She may not like my interference in an affair of such delicate nature. Love's language is said to be universal, and by it you should be able to understand each other."

"So fur's thet's consarned I reck'n we do unnerstan' each other. But this gurl being a Mexikin, she may hev queery ways, an' I want her promise guv in tarms from the which she kin hev no chance to take the back track—same as I mean to give myen."

"All right, Walt; I'll see you get that sort of promise, or none."

"Hooraw for you, Frank! This child air a-goin' to make the bargain stiff and strong. You transleet it jest in the same way."

"Trust me; it shall be done word for word."

"Thet's the sort!" joyfully exclaimed Walt, thinking that with Hamersley's assistance the consent of Conchita would be secured in binding terms.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A PROPOSAL BY PROXY.

The singular bargain between the prairie-merchant and his guide had just reached its conclusion, when a rustling among the branches of the hackberries, accompanied by a soft footstep, fell upon their ears.

Looking around, they saw Conchita treading her way through the grove. Her cautious and stealthy tread would have told of an "appointment," even had her design not been already known. Her whole bearing was that of one on her way to an interview with a lover; and the sight of Walt Wilder, whose gigantic form now stood erect to receive her, proclaimed him the one thus favored.

It might have appeared strange that she did not start back on seeing him in company with another man. She neither did this nor showed any shyness—evidence that the presence of the third individual was a thing pre-understood and arranged between her and Walt.

She came forward without timidity, and after courtesying to the "Senor Francisco," as she styled him, took her seat upon the log, from which Hamersley had arisen, Walt taking her hand and gallantly conducting her to the best place.

There was a short silence, which Conchita's sweetheart

endeavored to fill up with a series of gestures that might have appeared uncouth but for the solemnity of the occasion. This considered, they were full of grace and dignity.

But perhaps not deeming them so himself, Walt soon sought relief, by appealing to his interpreter in the following words:

“Dog gone it, Frank! ye see I can’t make the dear gurl unnerstan’ me; so you palaver to her. Tell her right off what I want. Say to her that I hain’t got much money, but a arm strong enuf to protect her through thick an’ through thin—agin the dangers o’ the mountain an’ the puraira—grizzly bars, Injuns, an’ all. She sees this child hev got a big body, an’ ye kin say to her thet his heart ain’t no great ways out o’ correspondin’ wi’ it. Then tell her, in the eend, thet this body, an’ arm, an’ heart air offered to her, an’ ef she’ll except ’em, they shall be hern, now, evermore, an’ to the death—so help me Heaven!”

As the hunter completed his proposal, thus emphatically ended, he brought his huge hand down upon his buckskin-covered breast with a slap like the cracking of a pistol. Whatever meaning the girl might have made out of his words, she could have had no doubt about their earnestness, if judged by the gestures that accompanied them.

Hamersley could not help having a strong provocation to mirth, but with an effort he subdued his risibility, and faithfully, though not very literally, translated his comrade’s proposal into Spanish.

When, as Walt supposed, he had finished, the hunter stood to await the answer, his huge frame trembling like the leaf of an aspen. He continued to shake all the while Conchita's response was being delivered, though the first words might have assured and set his nerves at rest could he only have understood them. But he knew not his fate till it had passed through the tedious transference from one language to another—from Spanish to his own native tongue.

“Tell him,” was the answer of the young girl, given without any show of insincerity or the slightest assumption of mock timidity, “that I love him as much as he can or does me ; that I loved him from the first moment of seeing him, and shall love him to the end of my life. In reply to his honorable proposal, senor, say to him yes ; I am willing to become his wife.”

When the answer was translated to Walt, he bounded at least three feet into the air, with a shout of triumph resembling that he might have given over the fall of an Indian foe. Then rushing toward the girl, he threw his great arms around her, lifted her from the ground as if she had been a child's doll, held her to his broad, beating bosom, and imprinted a kiss upon her lips, the concussion of which might have been heard far beyond the border of the hackberry grove.

The spectacle, though touching upon the grotesque and ludicrous, was yet pleasing to him who witnessed it ;



WHEN THE ANSWER WAS TRANSLATED TO WAIT, HE THREW HIS GREAT ARMS AROUND HER,
AND HELD HER TO HIS BROAD, BEATING BOSOM.—[page 180.]



for it struck a chord in his own heart sympathetically attuned.

“What a pity,” he reflected, “that there is no church near, no priest or other legalized authority to bind the two lovers together in the bonds of holy wedlock.”

Had there been so, he might have been thinking further that more than one couple were ready to submit themselves to the chain.

In the midst of his reflections came the thought that the presence of more than two individuals in that spot could be no longer either advantageous or desirable. His part had been performed, and he withdrew stealthily, without saying a word.

As he passed out through the grove, he fancied he saw a form skulking among the trunks of the trees—the form of a man. Twilight was now on, and under the branches of the hackberries there was an obscurity almost equal to that of night.

What he saw might have been some straying animal, or it might have been only fancy. His thoughts were running in a new channel, that carried him on toward the dwelling; for there one would be awaiting him in whose presence, with its divinity of refinement, he would soon forget the uncouth spectacle of love—almost its burlesque—at which he had been assisting.

The form seen cowering in the shadow was no fancy of Frank Hamersley, but one of real flesh and blood. It had followed Conchita from the house, and though in human

shape, had glided after her like a coyote or a snake. It was the peon, Manuel, who had thus entered the hackberry grove, and who had been there ever since, though observed only by Hamersley on passing out of it.

The skulker had seen all and heard everything—the proposal and its response, even the kiss so loudly pronounced between the lips of sweethearts. More afterward—enough to make him stand for a time with his knife half-drawn, his eyes flashing with the fires of a furious revenge—the revenge of jealousy.

For a moment might Walt Wilder's life have been deemed in danger. Fortunately for him the hand of his unseen enemy was staid by a coward's heart, and the hope of encompassing his rival's death by means equally effective and with less risk to himself. To kill the Texan on the spot, with Conchita as a witness, would be to forfeit his own life; and if he killed both, it would break his own heart. Besides, he might fail in the first blow, and then the giant would have him under his heel and crush him like a reptile. He held his hand and permitted them to depart in peace—the woman he wildly loved, and the man he as madly hated.

But after they had gone out of the grove he took his seat on the log they had left, and there pondered on a scheme of vengeance—sure as the steel of the assassin and far safer. He had already conceived and reflected upon it; now he became fixed in the determination to execute it. As he passed through the trunks of the trees, sauntering

back toward the ranch, he might have been heard muttering words of menace—at least they would have appeared so to any one who could have heard and understood them. No one heard, and no one could have understood them, except his fellow-peon, Chico, for they were spoken in a strange tongue. Even Chico would scarcely have comprehended their import. For all this they had a meaning—portentous and terrible.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DISCONTENTED SCOUNDREL.

Despite his rapid military promotion and the ill-gotten wealth he had acquired, Colonel Gil Uruga was anything but a happy man. Only at such times as he was engaged in some stirring affair of duty or deviltry, or when under the influence of drink, was he otherwise than wretched. To drink he had taken habitually, almost constantly. It was not to drown conscience; he had none.

The canker-worm that consumed him was not remorse, but the disappointment of a love-passion, coupled with a thirst for vengeance. There were moments when he was very miserable, his misery reaching acuteness whenever he either looked into the mirror, or stood before that portrait that hung against the wall of the parlor. For he loved Adela Miranda; and though his was the love of a coarse, brutal nature, it was strong and intense as the noblest man could feel.

In earlier days he had believed there was a hope for him to obtain her hand. Humble birth is no bar in Mexico—land of revolutions, where the sergeant or common soldier of to-day may to-morrow be a lieutenant, captain, or colonel. This hope had been stimulant to his military

aspirations—perchance one of the causes that had led him into crime. He believed that wealth might bridge over the social distinction between himself and her; and, in this belief, he cared not how it should be acquired. For the rest, he was not ill-looking—rather handsome, and fairly accomplished.

His facial beauty, however, was somewhat marred after he had received the sword-thrust from his Kentuckian adversary—driving out two front teeth and laying open his cheek. The teeth were replaced, but the scar could not be effaced. It remained a hideous cicatrice. Even the whisker, cultivated to its extremest outcrop, would not all conceal it. It was too far forward upon his face.

It was after this unfortunate affair that he had made the proposal to Adela Miranda. He could not help thinking it had something to do with her abrupt and disdainful rejection of him; though the young lady's little concealed disgust, coupled with her brother's indignation, had nothing to do with this physical deformity. But for his blind passion he might have perceived it. Fancying it to be so, it was not strange that he went half mad, and could be heard to utter a fearful oath every time he stood before his looking-glass.

After returning from that strange expedition of murder and pillage, he could gaze with a little more equanimity into the glass. From the man who had caused the disfiguration on his visage he had exacted a terrible retaliation. His adversary in the Chihuahua duel was now no

more. He had met with a fate sufficient to satisfy the most implacable spirit of vengeance; and often afterward, both sober and in his cups, would Colonel Uraga break out into peals of laughter—like the glee of a demon—as he reflected on the sufferings, prolonged and horrible, his hated enemy must have had before life became extinct.

Yet all this did not appease Uraga's malevolent spirit. A portion of his vengeance was due to the second in that duel, and it was still incomplete. If it could only be satisfied by the death of Miranda himself, then there would still be the other thought to torture him—his thwarted love, even stronger than his thirst for vengeance.

He was seated in the parlor of Miranda's house, which he now occupied as his headquarters. He was alone, his only companion being the decanter that stood upon a table beside him—this and a cigar. It was not wine he was drinking, but a beverage distilled from the juice of the wild aloe. Wine was too weak to calm his troubled spirit, as he glanced toward that portrait upon the wall. This night he had done so several times, each time, as he turned away, taking a fresh gulp of the liquor and igniting another cigar.

What signified all his success in villainy? What was life worth without possession of her? He would have murdered his dearest friend to obtain it—plundered him under her approving smile. But it was not to be.

Where could they have gone to? Only to the United States—that asylum of rebels and refugees. In the terri-

tory of New Mexico they could not have remained. He had searched every nook and corner of it by spies—had secured their diligence by promises of reward. He had dispatched secret emissaries in all directions; but no word of Miranda anywhere—no trace could be found either of him or his sister.

An exclamation too foul for translation escaped through his teeth, expressive of his anger at repeated disappointments; and at the same moment a man appeared in the door-way. After a gesture of permission to enter, he stepped inside the room.

He was an officer in full uniform—one whom we have met before, though not then in military costume. It was Lieutenant Roblez, his adjutant, as also his fellow-robber and co-assassin.

“I’m glad you’ve come, adjutant,” he said, motioning the new-comer to a seat. “To say the truth, I was feeling lonely, and wanted company to cheer me. You, Roblez, are just the man for that, you’ve got such a gift of conversation.”

This was ironical, for Roblez was silent as an owl.

“Sit down,” he added. “Have a cigar and a glass of this capital stuff.”

“I’ve brought other company,” said the adjutant, still keeping his feet.

“Ah! Some of the officers from the barracks? Bring them in.”

“It’s not any of them, colonel. It’s a stranger.”

“Stranger or not, you’re free to introduce him. I hope,” added he, in an undertone, “it’s some man who won’t mind trying his luck at *monte*. I’m just in the vein for a bit of gambling.”

“The man I wish to introduce doesn’t look as if he had much to lose. From what I can see of him in the darkness, I should say that the blanket upon his shoulders, and the sheepskin small clothes—somewhat torn at that—are about all the property he possesses.”

“He is a stranger to you, then?”

“As much as he will be to yourself, after seeing him—perhaps more.”

“But what sort of a man is he?”

“For that matter, colonel, he can hardly be described as a white man. He’s only an Indian.”

“Ha! Comanche?”

As he put this interrogatory, the colonel commandant gave a slight start, and looked a little uneasy. His relations with men of the Indian race were of a delicate nature, and although he was keen to cultivate their acquaintance when occasion required it, he preferred keeping all Indians at a distance, and especially Comanches, when he had no particular need for their services. The thought had flashed into his mind that the man waiting to be ushered into his presence might be a messenger from the Horned Lizard, and with this redskin he desired no further dealings—at least for a time. Therefore the thought of it being an emissary from the Tenawa chief just then slightly discom-

posed him. The reply of his subordinate, however, on this head reassured him.

“No, colonel; he is not a Comanche. Bears no resemblance to one, only in the color of his skin. He appears to be a Pueblo, and from his tattered costume I should take him to be a poor peon.”

“But what does he want with me?”

“That I cannot tell, only that he has expressed a very urgent desire to speak with you. I fancy he’s got something to say that it might be important for you to hear, else I should not have promised to introduce him.”

“You have promised?”

“I have, colonel. He is outside; shall I bring him in?”

“By all means. There can be no harm in hearing what the fellow has to say. It may be about some threatened invasion of the savages; and as protectors of the people, you, adjutant, know it is our duty to do all in our power to ward off such a catastrophe.”

The colonel laughed at his wry jest, Roblez grimly joining him in the laughter.

“Bring the brute in!” was the command that followed, succeeded by the injunction: “Stay outside yourself till I send for or call you. The fellow may have something to say intended for only one pair of ears. Take another glass of liquor, light a cigaritto, and amuse yourself in the garden.”

The adjutant followed the first two of these directions; and stepping out, left his superior officer alone.

Uraga glanced around to assure himself there were weapons within reach. With a conscience like his—a soul loaded with crime—no wonder.

His saber rested against the wall, close to his hand, and a pair of dragoon pistols were upon the table within reach.

Thus satisfied, he awaited the entrance of the Indian.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN CONFIDENCE.

Only a short interval, not more than a score of seconds, had passed, when the door once more opening, displayed to Uraga his visitor. Roblez, after ushering him into the room, withdrew, and commenced pacing to and fro in the garden.

Yet Uraga felt inclined to laugh as he contemplated the new-comer, and reflected on the precautions he had taken. A poor devil of an Indian peon, in coarse woollen shirt, tanned sheepskin trousers reaching only to the knee, bare legs below, and a straw hat on his head, his long black hair hanging unkempt and neglected over his shoulders, a mien humble and eyes downcast, like all of his tribe.

And yet it could be seen that on occasion those eyes could glow with a light that might indicate danger—a fierce, fiery light, such as might have shone in the orbs of his ancestors when they rallied around Guatimozin, and with clubs and stakes beat back the spears and swords of their Spanish invaders.

At the entrance of this unpretentious savage into the splendidly furnished apartment, his first act was to pull off his battered straw hat and make humble obeisance to the gorgeously attired officer who sat beside the table.

Up to this time Uraga had supposed him to be a stranger, but when the broad brim of the hat no longer cast its shadow over his face, and his eyelids became elevated through increasing confidence, the colonel sprang to his feet, with an exclamatory phrase that told of recognition.

“Manuel!” he said; “you are Manuel, the servant of Don Valerian Miranda?”

“Yes, colonel; at your excellency’s service,” was the reply, humbly spoken, and accompanied with a second sweep of the straw hat, as graceful as if given by a Chesterfield.

At sight of this old acquaintance a world of wild thought rushed crowding across the brain of Gil Uraga—conjecture, mingled with hopeful anticipation. It came back to his memory that at the time of Miranda’s escape some of his domestics had gone off with him; and he remembered, also, that Manuel was one of them. In the Indian now standing so respectfully before him he saw, or fancied he saw, the first link of that chain that might enable him to trace the fugitives. Manuel should know something about their whereabouts; Manuel was now in his power for any purpose—for life or death.

There was that in the air and attitude of the Indian that told him there would be no need to resort to compulsory measures. The information he desired could be had without this; and he began to seek it by adopting the opposite course.

"My poor fellow," he said, "you look distressed—as if you had just come from a long and toilsome journey. Here, take a taste of something to recuperate your strength, then you can repeat what you've got to say. I presume you have got some communication to make to me, as the military commandant of the district. Night or day, I am always ready to give a hearing to those who bring information that concerns the interests of the State."

The colonel poured out a stiff glass of liquor, which Manuel took from his hands, and nothing loth, spilled between his two rows of white, glittering teeth.

Upon him, unused to it, the fiery liquor was almost instantaneous in its effects, and in a moment after he became freely communicative, if not so disposed before. But he had been, and therefore the disclosures that followed were less due to alcohol than to a passion far more inflammatory.

"I've missed you from about here, Manuel," said the colonel, making his approaches with skill. "Where have you been all this while?"

"With my master," was the peon's reply.

"Ah, indeed? I thought your master had gone clear out of the country."

"Out of the settled part of it only, senor."

"Oh, he is still then within Mexican territory? I am glad to hear it. I was sorry to think we had lost such a good citizen and true patriot as Colonel Miranda. True,

he and I differ in our views as regards government, but that's nothing, you know, Manuel. Men may be bitter political enemies, and good friends for all that. By the way, where is the colonel now?"

Despite his apparent stolidity, the peon was not so shallow as to be misled by talk like this. With a full knowledge of the situation, forced upon him by various events, the badinage of the brilliant colonel did not for a moment blind him. Circumstances had given him enough insight into Uraga's character and position to know his motives to some extent resembled his own. He knew that the colonel-commandant was in love with his young mistress as much as he himself with her maid. Without his knowledge he might not have been there—at least, not with so confident an expectation of success in the design that had brought him, for design he had, deep and *traitorous*.

Despite the influence of the liquor, which was fast loosening his tongue, he was yet a little cautious in his communications; and not until Uraga had repeated the question did he make reply to it. Then came the answer, still slowly and reluctantly, as if from one of his long-suffering race, who had discovered a mine of precious metal, and was being put to the torture to divulge it.

"Senor colonel," he said, "how much will your excellency give to know where my master now is? I have heard that there is a very large bounty offered for Don Miranda's head."

"That is an affair that concerns the State, Manuel. I

have myself nothing personally to do with it. Still, as an officer of the government, it is my duty to do all I can for making your master a prisoner. I think I might promise the reward to any one who could produce the fugitive rebel and bring him before the bar of justice. Can you do that?"

"No, your excellency, not so much as that. I'm only a poor peon, and not powerful enough. To attempt making a prisoner of Don Miranda would cost me my life and the lives of many more like me. It will take strong soldiers to do it."

"Talking of strength, my good Manuel, you don't seem to have quite recovered yours. You must have had a very fatiguing journey. Take another glass of this reviving beverage. You are in need of it, and it will do you good."

Pressure of this sort, put upon an Indian peon, is rarely resisted. Nor was it in this case. Manuel readily yielded to it, and drank off another glass. Before the strong alcohol could have fairly settled in his stomach, its fumes were coursing through his skull.

The cowed, cautious manner, a marked characteristic of his tribe, soon forsook him; the check-string of his tongue became fully relaxed; and, with nothing remaining before his mind but the one scheme of securing Conchita, he betrayed the whole secret of Colonel Miranda's escape, the story of his retreat across the Staked Plain, and residence in the Lone Ranch.

When he told of the two guests who had strayed to the

solitary dwelling, and, despite his maudlin talk, minutely described the men, his listener sprang up with an oath, accompanied by a gesture of such violence as to overturn the table, sending cigars, decanters, and glasses to the floor.

He did not look to see the damage righted, but, with a loud shout, summoned in his adjutant, and then the corporal of the guard.

“*Cabo!*” he said, addressing himself to the latter in a tone at once vociferous and commanding, “take this man to the guard-house, and keep him there, so that he be forthcoming when wanted. If he is missing, Cabo, you shall be shot ten minutes after I receive the report of his disappearance. Take the word of your colonel for that.”

From the way that the corporal had hold of the surprised peon—almost throttling him—it was evident he did not intend running much risk of being shot by letting his prisoner escape, while the Indian appeared suddenly sobered by the rough treatment he was receiving; but he was still too much astonished to find speech for protest. Dumb, and without making the slightest resistance, he was dragged out through the door, to all appearance more dead than alive.

“Come, adjutant,” cried the colonel, as soon as the door closed behind the corporal and his prisoner, “drink! Let us drink! First to *revenge!* It is not accomplished as yet. No; it has all to be gone over again; but it is *sure* now—surer than ever. After that we shall drink to

my success in love. It is not hopeless, either. She is found again—found, adjutant! Ah! my pretty Adela!” he exclaimed, staggering toward the portrait, and in tipsy glee contemplating it, “you thought to escape me. But no. Nothing can get away from Gil Uraga—friend, sweetheart, or enemy. You shall yet be mine, infolded in these arms!”

CHAPTER XXX.

A MYSTERIOUS DISPATCH.

Uraga did not long continue his carousal in company with Roblez. He had an important matter upon his mind; and, after the excitement caused by Manuel's communication had to some extent given way to calmer reflection, he dismissed his adjutant, who went back to the barracks.

Though taking part with his colonel in many a criminal transaction, and having to share in the spoils, Roblez left all the planning to the superior officer, who, on his side, had secrets he did not always divulge to the confederate. He was desperate even in his villainies, and brooked no interference with his schemes.

And he had now conceived one of a nature he did not care to make known to any one—not even to Roblez—until such time as he might think it befitting for him to know it. It was not that he dreaded treachery on the part of his fellow-freebooter. There was no danger of that. They were too much mutually compromised to tell tales upon each other.

Besides, Roblez, although a man of courage, had a strong fear of Uraga; for he knew him to be one who, if

his hostility was once gained or his vengeance provoked, would stop at nothing short of complete and terrible retribution. Hence the control which his colonel had over him—so great that, while using him as an aid in his deeds of spoliation, he was still only rewarded by a limited share in the profits.

Uraga's chief motive for concealing many of his schemes from his adjutant was due more than aught else to a moral peculiarity. He was of a strangely constituted nature—secretive to the last degree—a quality on which he prided himself. It was his delight to deal in this habit whenever the opportunity offered, just as it is with the cheat and the detective.

After the adjutant had left him, he remained for some time alone, reflecting; and then calling the corporal of the guard, he directed him once more to bring in the Indian.

The prisoner, still wondering why he had been made one, soon after appeared, and in charge of the corporal, who was commanded to close the door and remain in waiting outside.

Thus closeted, Uraga put Manuel through a fresh process of examination, which elicited further facts in relation to those about whom he was so much interested. In fact, he made himself minutely acquainted with everything that had occurred, the Indian having been once more pacified, and the tongue for the second time untied by a fresh lubrication of liquor.

Among the things he was questioned about, the situation of the valley where the refugees had found an asylum, the direction, distance, and means of access to it—in short, its whole topography.

These questions he could answer satisfactorily, and did. He was then strictly examined about the personages there residing, especially the two strangers who had come as guests—when they had arrived, their reception, behavior, and doings.

These last interrogatories disclosed to Uraga a state of things—one fact in particular—that caused the blood to run rankly through his heart, and brought over his countenance a look of such bitter malignity that the traitor, in fear for his own safety, repented having told him of it. It was the tender relations that had been established between Frank Hamersley and the Senorita Miranda.

When the cross-questioning was finished, and he had told all he knew, Uraga once more committed him to the charge of the corporal, at the same time promising that his incarceration was only precautionary, and would not be for long.

As soon as he was taken out, Uraga betook himself to a desk that stood in one of the rooms, and opening it, he sat down, drew forth a sheet of paper, and commenced writing.

It had the appearance of being an epistle, but whatever it was, the composition occupied him some little time.

Occasionally he stopped using the pen, appearing to reflect on what should be written.

When it was at length completed, apparently to his satisfaction, he folded the sheet, thrust a stick of sealing-wax into the flame of the candle, and sealed the document, but without using any seal-stamp—a small silver coin taken from his pocket gave the necessary impression.

There did not appear to be any name appended to the epistle—if this it was; and the superscription now written upon the outside showed only the two words, “PAR SANCHEZ.”

A spring-bell, that stood on the desk, being touched, a man entered the room—one of the ordinary domestics.

“Go to the stables,” commanded his master, “or the corral, or wherever he is, and tell Pedrillo that I want him. Be quick about it.”

The man bowed and went off.

“It will take them how many days to reach the Tenawa’s town, and how many back to the Pecos?” soliloquized Uruga, pacing the floor as he made his calculations. “Three—four—five—no matter. If before them, I can wait till they come. Pedrillo!”

Pedrillo had made his appearance—an Indian of the same tribe, not greatly differing from the man Manuel, and of quite as sinister a countenance. But we have seen Pedrillo before, as he was one of the two muleteers who had conducted the train which carried the goods from the despoiled caravan.

"Pedrillo," commanded his master, "catch a couple of the best horses in the corral—one for yourself, the other for Jose. Have them saddled, and get yourselves ready for a journey of two weeks or so. Make all haste with your preparations, then back here and report yourself."

The muleteer disappeared, and Uraga continued to pace the floor, still apparently busied in a mental measurement of time and distance. At intervals he would stop before the portrait on the wall, and for a second or two gaze upon it. This seemed to increase his impatience for the reappearance of Pedrillo.

He had not very long to wait. The outfit of a New Mexican traveler of the peon class is of no great weight or complexity, and soon Pedrillo reported himself ready to take the road, or trail, or whatever sort of path, and on whatever errand it might please his master to dispatch him.

"You will go straight to the Tenawa town—Horned Lizard's—on the south branch of the Goo-al-pah. You can find your way to the place, Pedrillo? You have been there before?"

Pedrillo nodded in the affirmative.

"Take this," said Uraga, handing him the sealed epistle. "See that you show it to no one you may meet before getting beyond the settlements. Give it to the Horned Lizard, or you may hand it to Sanchez himself—it's for him. You are to ride night and day, as fast as your horses can carry you. When you've delivered it you

needn't wait, but come directly back—not here, but to the Alamo. You know the place?—where we met the Tenawas six weeks ago. You will find me there.”

On receiving these instructions, Pedrillo vanished from the room, a strange cast in his oblique Indian eye telling that he knew himself to be once more, what he had often been before—an emissary of evil.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE INTERCEPTED LETTER.

“By the way, Don Francisco, you never told me what the contents of your letter were.”

“What letter, colonel?”

“That you say you sent me by the spring caravan, and which, as you are now aware, never reached me.”

“Oh—it! Well, merely to say that I was coming back to New Mexico, and hoped to find you in good health.”

“Did it particularize the time you expected to arrive at Santa Fe, or elsewhere?”

“Yes; as far as I could fix it, I think it did.”

“The route by which you intended to travel?”

“That, too. I said I intended to make trial of a new trail, lately discovered, up the Canadian, and skirting the northern end of the Staked Plain. An unfortunate speculation, as it turned out.’

Perhaps, had Adela Miranda been taking part in the conversation, Don Francisco would not have made the last remark. Nor, on reflection and in secret thought, did he indorse it. She was not present—only her brother, his two guests, Frank Hamersley and Walt Wilder, with the old doctor, Don Prospero. They were smoking their

cigars and drinking a bottle of wine, after the senorita had retired to rest.

"Why did you ask, Colonel Miranda?"

The question was put by the young Kentuckian, who, as also the other two, had noticed that their host was unusually meditative.

"Because," said Miranda, "I've been thinking a good deal about the attack on your caravan. The more I reflect upon it, the more am I led to suspect that there were *painted* Indians in the party that plundered you."

"They appeared to be all painted," was the simple rejoinder made by the young prairie-merchant.

"That isn't what I mean, Don Francisco."

"This child knows what he mean," interposed Wilder, starting up excitedly from his seat, as the Mexican made the remark. "That's been my surspeeshun all along. You know what I tolt ye, Frank?"

Hamersley looked interrogatively, as also did Don Prospero.

"Did not I say that I seed two men among the Injuns wi' har upon thar faces? They wan't Injun—they war white. Ain't that what ye mean, kurnel?"

"Precisely!" was the colonel's reply.

All waited for him again to speak and give the explanation. Wilder already half guessed it; the doctor more than half. Even the Kentuckian, less experienced in Mexican ways and wickedness, began to have a glimmering of the truth.

Seemingly weighing well his words, Miranda continued:

"No doubt it was a band of Comanches who attacked and destroyed your caravan and killed your comrades. But I have as little doubt that there was a *white man* among them—one, at least, who planned and instigated the deed."

"Who, Colonel Miranda?" was the quick interrogatory of the Kentuckian, who spoke first because he was the only one of the four who now needed explanation. Nor did he much need it, for the name pronounced by Miranda was upon the point of his own tongue. It was "*Uraga!*"

"Yes," said the refugee colonel; "Gil Uraga is undoubtedly the robber who has despoiled you, though it was done in the guise of an Indian attack, and with real Indians as his assistants. I see it all now clear as sunlight. He got your letter addressed to me as colonel commanding the district of Albuquerque. As a matter of course, he opened it. It told him when and where to meet you, your strength, the value of your cargo, everything. The last was not needed as an incentive for Gil Uraga to attack you, Don Francisco. The scar you left upon his cheek was sufficient. Didn't I tell you at the time he would move heaven and earth to be revenged upon both of us? He has striven well; and behold his success! I, a hunted refugee, robbed of everything; you almost the same; both of us ruined men!"

"Not yet!" exclaimed the Kentuckian, springing to his feet, as if the juice of the grapes had got into his

head. "Not ruined yet, Colonel Miranda. If it be as you say, I will follow this fiend, if need be, into the very heart of Mexico, and get my own out of him."

"Thar's one'll go wi' ye!" cried Walt Wilder, with unusual rapidity unfolding his gigantic form. "Yis, Frank, to the heart o' Mexiko, plum center; thet air place I've heern so much talk'd o'—the pallis o' Monty-zooma. Hyar's a goodish-sized child riddy for the start!"

"If," said Hamersley, his coolness coming back, as he saw the more irrational enthusiam of his comrade, "if, Colonel Miranda, it should turn out as we have conjectured, surely there is law in your land; not much, I suspect, but enough for an outrage like this?"

"My dear Don Francisco," replied the Mexican ex-colonel, quietly rolling a fresh cigarette between his fingers, "there is law for those who have the power and influence to obtain it. In New Mexico, as you must yourself know, might makes right; and never more than at this present hour. Don Manuel Armigo is once more the governor of my unfortunate fatherland. When I tell you that he rose to his present position by just such an act as that which has despoiled you, you may then understand the sort of law administered in New Mexico. Manuel Armigo was a shepherd—employed on one occasion to drive a flock of thirty thousand sheep, the property of his masters, the Senores Lino and Charez, to the northern markets of Chihuahua. While crossing the Jernada del Muerte, he and one or two confederates, whom he had instructed in his

plan, disguised themselves as Apache Indians, attacked their fellow sheep-drivers, murdered them, and made themselves masters of the whole flock. Then, pulling the plumes from their heads, and washing the paint off their faces, they drove their charge to a different market, sold them, and returned to Lino and Charez to tell a tale of Indian spoliation, and how they themselves had escaped with the hair still safe on their heads. This is the true history of General Manuel Armigo, now governing New Mexico; at least, that of his first beginnings. With such, and many similar deeds by him done since, is it likely he would look with any other than a lenient eye on the doings of Gil Uruga, his pet? No, Don Francisco, not even if you could prove the present colonel-commandant of Albuquerque, in full open court, to have been the man who despoiled yourself and butchered your companions."

"I shall try, for all that," said Hamersley, his heart half in sorrow at the remembrance of his slaughtered comrades, and half bursting with the bitterness of balked vengeance. "Don't suppose, Colonel Miranda, that I intend resting my cause on the clemency of Don Manuel Armigo, or any doubtful justice to be expected at his hands. There's a wide stretch of prairie between the United States and Mexico, but not so wide as to hinder our American eagle from flapping its wings across it, and giving protection to all of us who stray this way—even to us poor prairie traders. A thousand thanks, my dear colonel. I owe you far more for twice saving my life; and now for

setting me on the true track of the scoundrel who has since endangered it. Parting from your hospitality, I shall go in search of him—direct to the valley of the Del Norte. If I find our man there, and discover that we are not wronging him by our conjectures, don't fear that I shall fail in obtaining justice, whatever Don Manuel Armigo may do to defeat it."

"More'n justice!" added the hunter-guide, again springing from his seat with a violent gesticulation. "Only think o' thirteen innocent men—every one o'em brave as lions—attackted 'ithout word o' warnin', shot down, slaughtered, an' sculped 'mong the tongues an' wheels o' wagons; think o' thet, an' then don't talk about justice; talk only o' *revenge!*"

CHAPTER XXXII.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

"I have news for you, my dear—news that will be pleasant."

It was Colonel Miranda speaking to his sister, one morning after his guest had gone out.

"What news, Valerian?"

"We shall at last have an opportunity of leaving this lone place. Our residence here, away from all society, has been a harsh experience—for you, dear sister, a terrible one."

"In that, brother, you mistake. You know I never cared a straw for what the world calls 'society.' I've always liked better being free from its restraint and conventionalities. Give me Nature for my companion—Nature in her wildest moods."

"Here you have had them, I should think, to a surfeit."

"No; not to a surfeit. I have never been happier than in this, our wilderness home. How different from the convent-school—or prison, I should rather style it. Oh! it has been charming; and if I were to have my way, it should never come to an end. Conchita tells me that Manuel has returned from the Del Norte. He has brought

you news, and there is a hope of your being permitted to go back. I don't wish it, brother. After what has passed, I hate New Mexico, and would stay all my life in the desert."

"Manuel has returned, but with no such news. On the contrary, the despots are stronger and more insulting than ever. Armigo now governs without the slightest responsibility; while the ruffian Uraga lords it around Albuquerque. Manuel reports that he is actually living in our house, which has been made over to him by confiscation. Besides, the reward is still offered for my arrest, or the discovery of my whereabouts. No, Adela; when I spoke of an opportunity of leaving this place, I did not think of going back to the *Nel Norte*."

"Where then, brother?"

"In the very opposite direction—to the United States. Don Francisco counsels me to do so, and I have yielded to his counsel."

Adela seemed less disposed to offer opposition to this change. She did not protest against it.

"I thought Senor Hamersley was himself going to the *Del Norte*," she said, and then listened with apparent eagerness for the answer.

"He is, but only to stay for a short time. He will then return to his own country, and proposes that we all accompany him. Dear sister, we cannot do better. There seems no hope of our unfortunate country getting rid of her tyrants—at least for some time to come. When the

next day comes round for our patriots to arise, I shall know it in time to return. Now, we can only think of safety; and although I don't wish to alarm you, I've never felt safe here. Who knows but that Uraga may yet discover our Lone Ranch, even in the heart of the desert? He has his scouts everywhere, and we now know of his being leagued with the savages. Every time Manuel makes a visit to the settlements, I have my fear of his being followed back. In any case, it will be better for us to go with Don Francisco. He and I have talked the matter over, along with the hunter and the doctor. We are all of one mind about it. Since his arrival, the hunter has been exploring every nook in the neighborhood. He is of the opinion that our little stream here is one of the headwaters of the great river of Texas—the Brazos de Dios. He knows Texas well, having spent the greater part of his life there. He proposes that we should descend this stream, trusting to his guidance to take us to some of the settlements below. What can be better or safer?"

"But I thought Senor Hamersley intended going to the Del Norte."

"Upon that he is determined. I have told him that there is danger—have pointed it out to him. He only makes light of it. He has been robbed, and has reason to suspect who have been the robbers. By going to the Del Norte he hopes to find a clew to their identification. Even if he should, there will still be danger for him."

"Dear brother, do try to dissuade him!"

If Hamersley could have heard the earnest tone in which the appeal was spoken, it would no doubt have given him gratification.

“I have tried, but to no purpose. It is not the loss of his property; he is generous, and does not regard it. His motive is a holier one. His comrades have been killed—murdered. He says he must seek the assassins and obtain redress—their punishment—even at the risk of sacrificing his own life. I have tried, dear Adela. It is useless to attempt restraining him.”

“Noble man—a hero! Who could help loving him?”

This was not spoken aloud, nor to any one. It was a soliloquy, secret and silent, heard only within the heart of her who conceived it.

“If you wish,” continued Colonel Miranda, “I will see him again, and endeavor to dissuade him from this reckless course, though I know there is little hope. Stay! A thought strikes me. Suppose you try, sister. A woman’s words are more likely to be listened to; and I know that yours will have weight with Don Francisco. He looks upon you as the savior of his life, and may yield to your request.”

“If you think so, Valerian——”

“I do. Stay where you are, sister. I will send him to you.”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LOVE AND DUTY.

With a heart heaving and surging, Hamersley stood in the presence of her who was causing its tumultuous excitement. Into that presence he had been summoned, and knew it. Her brother had spoken point-blank the invitation: "Don Francisco, my sister wishes to see you." To which Don Francisco had readily, though tremblingly, responded.

What was to be the import of an interview unexpected, unsought, apparently commanded?

It seems superfluous to say that the young prairie-merchant was by this time passionately in love with Adela Miranda. Even the portrait, seen hanging against the wall at Albuquerque, had predisposed him to such a passion. The features of Morisco-Andalusian type, so unlike those in his own land; the description of her given by her brother, coupled with the incidents that led to friendly relations with that brother, all piquing to curiosity, had sown the first seeds of a tender sentiment. It had not died out. Neither time nor distance had obliterated it. Far off, even when occupied with the pressing claims of business, that portrait face had often appeared upon the

retina of his memory, and more than once shown itself in the visions of dreamland. And now that he had looked upon it in reality, saw it in all its loving beauty, surrounded by scenes strangely wild as its own expression, amid incidents as romantic as his fancy could have conceived—now that he knew it to be the face of her who had saved his life—is it any wonder that the sentiment first provoked by the portrait should become a passion at sight of herself?

It had done so—a passion all-pervading; and the strong Kentuckian trembled as he reflected on the chances of its being reciprocated and returned. This he had been doing every day and every hour from that in which consciousness became restored to him; and upon a word spoken in that hour had he rested more hope than upon all seen or heard since. Ever in his ear rang that sweet soliloquy that told him he was not alone in the chamber.

There had been nothing afterward, neither word nor deed, to strengthen the belief that he was beloved. The beautiful girl had been a tender nurse, a hostess, apparently solicitous to give satisfaction—nothing more. Was the soliloquy he had heard but a trite speech unfelt and unmeaning, or had it been but an illusion born from the still-lingering distemper of his brain?

He longed to know the truth. Every hour that he remained in ignorance of it he was in torture, equaling that of Tantalus or Sisyphus. And yet he feared to seek the revelation, for in it might be ruin.

How he envied Walt Wilder his common love and its conquest, and somewhat coarse declaration! What would he not have given to have received a similar answer? A score of times he had been on the eve of asking the same question.

His trade's success should have emboldened him. It did not; there was no parallel between the parties.

He had delayed seeking that knowledge he most desired to possess. But it was now nearing the last moment, and he had arrived at a resolution. He was soon to take departure from that spot where he had experienced so much pleasure, mingled with an imaginary pain. What was in the future before him? Happiness or misery? Joy delirious or the wildest of woe? A word from Adela Miranda would decide which—a word of one syllable. He had at length made up his mind to ask for and have it. In this mood was he when summoned to her side. No wonder he came trembling into her presence.

"Senorita," he said, despite all that had passed, addressing her with distant respect, "your brother has told me you wish to speak with me."

"I do, Don Francisco," she replied, without quail in her look or quiver in her voice. A judge upon his bench could not have looked more unmovedly at the culprit before him.

In returning her glance, Hamersley felt as if his case was hopeless. The thought of proposing at once passed from his mind. He simply said:

"May I ask, senorita, what it is you wish to speak to me about?"

"About your going back to the Rio Del Norte. My brother tells me such is your intention. I wish you not to go, Don Francisco. There is danger in your doing it."

"It is my duty."

"In what way? Explain yourself."

"My men have been slain—murdered, I may say. Thirteen of them in all, comrades and followers. I have reason to believe that by going to Albuquerque I can find these assassins, or, at all events, their chief, and, perhaps, bring him to justice. I intend trying, if it cost me my life."

"Do you reflect, Don Francisco, what your life is worth?"

"To me not much."

"It may be to others. You have at home a mother, brothers, sisters—perhaps one still dearer?"

"No; not at home."

"Elsewhere, then?"

Hamersley was silent under this searching inquiry.

"Do you not think that danger to your life would be unhappiness to hers—your death her misery?"

"My disgrace should be more so, as it would to myself. Senorita, it is not vengeance I feel toward those who have murdered my comrades; only a desire to bring them to justice. I must do it, or else proclaim myself a poltroon, a coward, with a self-accusation that would give me a life-

long remorse. No, senorita, it is kind of you to take an interest in my safety. I already owe you my life, but I cannot permit even *you* to save it again at the sacrifice of honor, of duty, of humanity."

There was just a sprinkling of pique in this speech—the slightest touch of bravado.

Hamersley fancied himself being coldly judged and counseled with indifference. Had he known the warm, wild emotion that was struggling in the heart of her who conversed with him, he would have made answer in a different style.

Soon after he was speaking in an altered tone, and with a changed understanding; and so was she, hitherto so difficult of comprehension.

"Go!" she said; "go and get justice for your fallen comrades, and, if you can, punishment for their assassins. But remember, Don Francisco, if it bring death to you, *there is one who will not care to live after you!*"

"Who?" cried the Kentuckian, springing forward with heart and eyes aflame. "Who?"

He scarcely needed to ask the question. It was already answered by the emphasis on the last words spoken.

But it was again answered in a more tranquil tone, the long, dark lashes of the speaker vailing her eyes with modest resignation, as she pronounced her own name:

"Adela Miranda!"

From poverty to riches, from the dungeon to bright daylight, from the agonized struggle of drowning to that

confident feeling when the feet stand firm upon the shore, are all sensations of happiness. They are but dull in comparison with the delirious joy which is the lot of the despairing lover on finding that his despair has been but a fancy, and his passion is reciprocated.

Such an experience had Frank Hamersley, as he heard the name pronounced. It was like a mystic speech, opening to him the portals of heaven.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

RETURNING FROM A RAID.

An Indian encampment. It is upon a creek called Pecan, a confluent of the Little Wichita River, heading about a hundred miles from the eastern edge of the Staked Plain.

There are no tents in the encampment—not even a tent-pole; only here and there a buffalo robe extended horizontally upon upright sticks, branches that have been cut from the pecan. These and the umbrageous canopy of the trees protect the encamped warriors from the fervid rays of a noonday sun, striking vertically down.

That they are warriors is evidenced by the absence of tents. A peaceful party on its ordinary passage across the prairies would have its lodges along with it—grand council structures of dressed buffalo skins—with the squaws that set them up, and the dogs or ponies that transported them scattered around.

In this encampment on the Pecan are neither squaws, dogs, nor ponies. Only men, naked to the waist, their bodies above painted, chequered like parchments or the tight-fitting jackets of the stage-harlequin, some showing devices fantastic, even ludicrous, others of an aspect terrible as the death's-head and crossbones.

An old prairie man on seeing them would have at once said: "Injuns on the war-trail."

It did not need this sort of experience to tell they were returning from it. If there were no ponies or dogs around the encampment, there were other animals in abundance—horses, mules, and horned cattle. Horses and mules of American breed, and cattle whose ancestral stock had come from Tennessee or Kentucky along with the early colonists of Texas.

And if there were no squaws or papooses, there were women and children—both white. A group of these could be seen near the center of the encampment. It did not need their disheveled hair to show they were captives; nor yet the half-dozen savages, spear-armed, standing sentry over them. Their drooping heads and despairing faces were evidence sufficient of the sad situation.

What were these captives, and who were their captors? Two questions easily answered. In a general way, the picture explained itself. The first were the wives and children, with sisters and grown-up daughters among them, of Texan colonists, from a settlement near the frontier—too near to protect itself from an Indian maraud. It was one pressed forward into the fertile tract of land lying among the Cross Timbers. And the marauders were a party of Comanches, with whom the reader has made some acquaintance, for they were no other than the band of the Horned Lizard.

The time is about six weeks subsequent to that tragical

scene of the caravan capture already described, and judging from the spectacle now before us, we may conclude that the Comanche chief has not spent the interval in idleness. At least two hundred miles lie between the northern part of the Staked Plain, where the caravan was destroyed, and the Cross Timbers. Yet twenty more to the scene of the despoiled settlement, whose spoils in horses, horned cattle, mules, and captives now make such an imposing appearance in the Indian camp.

Such quick work requires some explanation. It is a double stroke, at variance with the customs and inclination of the prairie freebooter, who, having acquired a booty, rarely attempts any other effort till its proceeds are all squandered. He is like the anaconda, that having gorged itself, lies torpid till the cravings of a new hunger once more arouse it to activity.

This would have been the case with the Horned Lizard and his band but for a circumstance of a somewhat unusual kind. The attack on the merchant caravan was not planned by himself, but a scheme of his secret ally—the military commandant of Albuquerque. The summons had come to him unexpectedly, and after he had planned his descent on the Texan settlement. But sanguinary as that act was, it had been brief, and left him time to carry out his original design, that had proved almost as tragical in its execution. — Here and there a spear standing up, with a tuft of light-colored hair, blood-clotted, upon its blade, was evidence of this—quite as successful, too. The grand

drove of horses, mules, and cattle—to say nothing of that group of wan, woe-struck captives—proved the spoil worth as much, or more, as that taken from the traders' wagons.

The Horned Lizard was jubilant, along with every warrior of his band. In loss their late-made spoil had cost them little—only one or two of their number killed by the settlers in defending themselves. It made up for their severe sacrifice sustained in their attack upon the caravan. If the number of their tribe was reduced, there were now the fewer to share with; and what with the cotton goods of Lowell, the gaudy prints of Manchester, the stripes, stroudings, and scarlet cloths to bedeck and array them, the hand-mirrors in which to admire themselves, the horses to ride upon, the mules to carry their tents, and the cattle to eat, the white women to be their concubines, and the children their attendants—all these were fine prospects for a savage—sufficient to make him jubilant, almost delirious with joy.

A new era had dawned upon the tribe of which the Horned Lizard was chief. Hitherto it had been a somewhat starving community, its range lying amid sterile tracts on the upper tributaries of the Red River and Canadian. Now before it was a time of feasting and luxury, such as rarely occurs to a robber band, whether amid the forest-clad mountains of Italy, or on the treeless prairies of America.

The Comanche chief was joyous and triumphant; so also his second in command, whose skin, with the paint

cleaned from it, would have shown him nearly white. He was, in truth, a Mexican—in early life taken captive by the Comanches, and long since made familiar with the mysteries of the tribe; now one of its warriors, cunning and cruel as the Horned Lizard himself. It was he who had first put the Comanche chief in communication with the ruffian Uraga.

As the two stood together contemplating the group of captives, especially scanning the features of the younger women, the sensuous expression on their features was hideous to behold. It would have been a painful sight for father, brother, or husband.

And there were fathers, brothers, and husbands near—almost within sight. An eye elevated six hundred feet above the plain would have seen them—that of the soaring eagle.

There *were* birds above—not eagles, but vultures; for the foul buzzard frequently follows the redskin in his maraud. Their instinct tells them that his path will be stained with blood and strewn with carcasses. There was a flock of these birds hovering in the heavens above; also another flock not far off, though too far to attract the attention of the Indians. Now and then between the two a straggler might have been seen passing, as if a courier carrying a dispatch.

The vultures of the second flock were also hovering above an encampment; but very different was the appearance of the personages composing it. They were all men

—not a woman or child among them—bearded men, with white skins, and wearing the garb of civilization—not of the most select kind or cut, nor all in the exact dress of civilized life; for among them were many whose buck-skin hunting-shirts, fringed leggings, and moccasined feet showed equally the costume of the savage. Besides these there were men in blanket-coats of red, green, and blue—all sweat-stained and dust-tarnished, tilt the colors nearly corresponded. Others in frocks of blue-gray Kentucky jeans, or the good old copper-colored homespun. Still others in the sky-blue cottonades, product of the hand-mills of Attakafras. Boots and brogans of all kinds of leather, stained and unstained—even that tanned from the skin of the alligator. Hats of every shape, fashion, size, and material—straw, chip, Panama, wool, felt, and even the silk belltopper (bad imitation of beaver), all looking worst for wear.

In one thing these personages were nearly all alike—their arms and equipment. All were belted, pouched, and powder-horned; a bowie-knife, with a revolving pistol, in the belt, some with two, and each carrying a rifle in his hand.

Besides this uniformity, there were still other resemblances—at least among a portion of them. It was noticeable in their rifles, which were yagers of the army-branded pattern; still more apparent in the caparison of their horses, that carried cavalry saddles, their peaks and cantles mounted with brass. Among these there was a sort of

uncouth, half-military discipline, indicated by some slight deference shown to two or three of them, who appeared to be officers. They were, in fact, a troop, or, as among themselves styled, a company of "Texas Rangers."

Not all in the encampment were of this organization, only about half. The other half were the fathers, brothers, and husbands whom the Horned Lizard and his band had despoiled of their daughters, sisters, and wives.

Like or unlike to one another, they were still more unlike to the crowd composing the encampment of the savages. The buzzards above seemed conscious of the distinction, and perhaps also understood its significance. These same birds might have seen a similar sight before—almost certain had they—and could tell what was likely to follow from such a close proximity of adverse colors and antagonistic forms. There may have been an electricity in the air, telling the birds of what was to come—in the same way as they are forewarned of a storm.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A COUP.

“I have spoken of the party of Texans as forming an encampment. This is not correct. They were only bivouacked. Not even a stoppage so ceremonial as this. They were but halted to breathe and water their horses, snatching meanwhile a scrap from their haversacks. This last not leisurely. There were men among them that could not brook delay—men with hearts to whom every hour seemed a day, every lost minute torture. These were they whose homes had been rendered desolate.

Their associates, the rangers, were almost equally impatient at detention. They had now struck the trail of their life-long enemies, and not only the younger, but the oldest of them, like old hounds upon a deer-track, were to be held back by no leash until they had buried their bowies in blood.

They knew whom they were in pursuit of—the Horned Lizard and his band. Many of the rangers had an old score to settle with the Tenawa chief—a balance of bloody retaliations. They were in hopes that the time was at hand.

“They can’t be far off now, cap’n,” said a thin little old

A COUP.

completely clothed in buckskin, without tag or ornament, and who looked as if he had seen at least half a century upon the plains. "I kin tell by the sign thet they passed this hyar pint jest a hour arter sun-up."

"You are sure of that, Cully?" asked the individual spoken to, who was the captain of the rangers.

"Sure as ef I'd been hyar an' seed 'em. This hottish spell o' sun air boun' to bring 'em to a halt, 'specially as they're cummered wi' the stock an' keptyves; an' I reck'n I kin tell the 'dzact spot whar they'll make stop."

"Where?"

"Pee-cawn crik. Thar they'll git sweet water an' shade. Sartint they'll stop thar, an' maybe stay a spell. The skunks won't hev neery idee thet we're arter them so fur from the settlements."

"If they're up on the Pecan," interrupted a third speaker, a tall, lathy individual in a blue blanket coat, badly faded, "and anywhere near its mouth, we can't be more than five miles from them. I know this part of the country well. I passed through it along with the Santa Fe expedition."

"Only five miles!" exclaimed another man, whose dress bespoke the planter of respectability, while his sad countenance proclaimed him to be one of the bereaved. "Oh, gentlemen! Our horses are now rested. Why not ride forward and attack them at once?"

"We'd be durned foolish to do so," replied the old man in buckskin. "Thet, Mr. Wilton, 'ud be jess the way to defeat all our plans an' purpusses. They'd see us long

afore we ked get sight o' them, time enuff to toat off the hosses an' cattle—leastwise, the weemen."

"What's your way, Cully?" asked one of the rangers.

"Wait till the sun go down; then 'proach 'em. Thar boun' to hev fires, an' they'll guide us right into thar camp. Ef it air in Pee-cawn bottom, as I'm sartint it air, we kin surroun' 'em eesy. Thar's bluffs aboth sides, an' we kin divide inter two lots, one stealin' roun' an' comin' from up the crik, whiles the tother 'tacks 'em from below. Thet way we'll make sure o' keepin' 'em from runnin' off the weemen; besides, it air the more likelier chance to count sculps."

"What do you say, boys?" interrogated the ranger-captain, addressing himself more especially to the men composing his band.

"Cully's right," was the response, spoken by a majority of voices.

"Then we must stay here till night. If we go forward now, they may see us before we get within shooting distance. Do you think, Cully, you can take up the trail at night, supposing it to be a dark one?"

"Pish!" retorted the guide, for Cully was acting in that capacity; "take up the trail? Yis, on the blackest night as iver shet down over a paraira. Durn me, I ked smell it!"

There was no further discussion. Cully's opinion was all-powerful, and determined their course of action.

The halt, at first intended only to be temporary, was

continued till the going down of the sun, despite expostulations and almost prayerful entreaties on the part of some of the men—the settlers who had left their desolated homes behind them, and who were burning with impatience once more to embrace the dear ones whose absence rendered them desolate.

* * * * *

Before another sun went down, even before it had fairly risen, they were one and all blessing the guide who had given the counsel contradictory to their own. It was as Cully had predicted.

The Indian despoilers had made halt on Pecan Creek, and no longer fearing pursuit, tarried all night in their encampment. They had kindled large fires, and roasting upon them the fattest of the captured kine, spent the fore part of the night in a grand feast. Engrossed with their joys, they had neglected guard, and, in the midst of their savage festivities they were suddenly set upon from all sides, the sharp cracking of the rifle and the quick detonation of the revolver silencing their savage laughter and scattering them like chaff.

After the first fusillade there was but little left of them. Those who were not instantly shot down escaped in the darkness, skulking off among the pecan trees. It was altogether an affair of fire-arms, and for once the bowie, the Texan's trusted weapon, had no part in the fray.

The first rays of the sun shed their light upon a strange scene—a tableau sanguinary, and yet not altogether sad.

On the contrary, it disclosed a sight that, but for the red surroundings, might have seemed all of gladness.

Fathers half frantic with joy embracing children they had never expected to see again; brothers clasping the hands of sisters supposed lost to them forever; husbands, late broken-hearted, once more made happy by the restoration of their wives.

This was the pleasant side of the picture. Close by was presented that of less cheerful aspect. Corpses strewed over the ground, still bleeding, scarce yet stark or still, all of coppery complexion, all Indians. Among them, recognized by Cully and others of the rangers, his ancient enemies, the body of the Horned Lizard. Only one captive was taken alive, and he, because having a white skin, had done what was disdained by his red-skinned associates, begged for his life.

A tableau at once terrible and pleasing—a contrast of passions and emotions such as may only be encountered on the far frontier of Texas.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE FORCED CONFESSION.

On counting the corpses of their slain enemies, the Texans found that at least one-half of the Tewana band had fallen, including its chief.

They could make an approximate estimate of the number that had been opposed to them by the signs scattered around the camp, as also by the trail they had been for several days following. Those who escaped had got off, some on their horses, hastily caught and mounted, others afoot, by taking to the timber.

They were not pursued, as it was still dark night when the action ended, and by daylight these wild centaurs, well acquainted with the country, would be scattered beyond all chance of being overtaken.

The settlers were satisfied at having recovered their relatives, as well as their stolen stock, and for the rangers enough had been accomplished to slake their vengeful thirst, at least, for the time.

These last had not come off unscathed, for the Comanches, well armed with guns, bows, and lances, had not died unresistingly. In Texas Indians rarely do, and never when they know that it is a fight with rangers.

Between them and these frontier guerrillas, in one sense as much savages as themselves, it is an understood thing: war to the bitter end, and no quarter either asked or granted.

The Texan loss was three of their number killed and about twice as many wounded; enough, considering the advantage they had had in this unwarned attack upon an enemy for once unwatchful.

When the conflict was ended, and sunrise had made manifest the result, the victors took possession of the spoils—most being their own property. The cattle and horses that had strayed or stampeded during the fight were again collected into a drove, those of the Indians being united to it. This done, only a short stay was intended, just long enough to bury the bodies of the three rangers who had been killed, get stretchers prepared for such of the wounded as were unable to sit in the saddle, and make their preparations for taking the back-track toward the settlements.

They were not hastening their return through any apprehension of a counter attack on the part of the Comanches. Fifty Texas Rangers—and there were this number in the party—have no fear on any part of the plains, so long as they are mounted on good horses, carrying rifles in their hands, bowie-knives and pistols in their belts, a sufficient supply of powder in their ~~hacks~~ ^{bags}, and bullets in their pouches. With all these things they were amply provided, and had there been any necessity for continuing the pur-

suit, or the prospect of striking another blow, they would have gone on, even though the chase should conduct them into the defiles of the Rocky Mountains. To pursue and slay the savage was their vocation, their duty.

But the settlers were desirous of returning to their homes, that they might relieve the anxiety of other dear ones who there awaited them. Glad tidings they could carry.

While the preparations for departure were going on, Cully, who, with several other rangers, was collecting the weapons and accouterments found upon their slain enemies, gave utterance to a peculiar cry that brought a crowd of his comrades around him.

"What is it, Nat?" inquired the ranger-captain.

"Look hyar, cap—de'ye see this gun?"

"Yes; a hunter's rifle. Whose is it?"

"That's jess the queshin, though thar arn't no queshin about it. Boys, do any o' ye recognize this hyar shootin'-iron?"

One after the other the rangers stepped up and looked at the rifle.

"I do," said one.

"And I," added another, and a third and fourth, all making the affirmation in a tone of surprise.

"*Walt Wilder's gun!*" continued Cully, "sure an sartin. I know it, an' shed know it. See them two letters on the stock thar, 'W. W.' Old Nat Cully hez good reesuns to recognize them, since 'twar hisself that cut 'em. I did it

for Walt two years ago, when we war scoutin' on the Collyrado. It's his weepun, an' no mistake."

"Where did you get it?" inquired the captain.

"I've jess tuk it out o' the claws o' the ugliest Injun as iver made trail on the puraira; that beauty thar, whose karkidge the buzzards won't be likely to tech."

As he spoke, Cully pointed to a corpse. It was that of the Tenawa chief, Horned Lizard, already recognized among the slain.

"He must a hed it in his clutch when suddenly shot down," Cully went on. "An' whar did he get it? Boys, our ole kummarade's *wiped out* for sartin. I know how Walt loved that thar weepun. He wouldn't a parted wi' it unless 'long wi' his life."

This was the conviction of several others, who knew Walt Wilder. It was the company to which he had formerly belonged.

"Thar's been foul play somewhar," pursued Cully. "Walt went back to the States, to Kaintuck, ef this chile arn't mistook. But tain't likely he staid thar. He kedn't keep long off o' the purairas. I tell ye, boys, these hyar Injuns hev been makin' mischief somewhar. Look thar; look at thar leggins. Thar's no eend o' white sculps, an' fresh 'uns, too."

The eyes of all were turned toward these terrible trophies that in gory garniture fringed the buckskin leg-wear of the savages. Cully, with several others who had known Wilder well, proceeded to examine them, in full expectation that

they would find among them the skin of their old comrade's head.

There were seven scalps of white men, among many that were of Indians, and not a few that exhibited the equally black but shorter crop of the Mexican. Those that were indubitably of white men showed the evidence of having been recently taken, but none could be identified as that of Walt Wilder.

There was some relief in this, for his old comrades loved Walt. Still there was his gun, which Cully declared could only be taken from him along with his life. How had it come into the hands of the Horned Lizard?

"I reckon we can settle that," said the captain of the rangers. "The renegade ought to know something about it."

This speech referred to the Mexican who had been taken prisoner, and about whose disposal they had already commenced holding council. Some were for shooting him on the spot; others proposed hanging, while only a few of the more humane advocated taking him on to the settlements and there giving him a trial. He would have to die anyhow, that was pretty sure, for, not only as a Mexican was he their enemy, but now doubly so from being found in league with their more savage foeman, the Comanches.

The wretch was lying on the ground close by, trembling with fear, in spite of the fastenings in which he was tightly held. He knew he was in danger, and had only so far

escaped from having surrendered to a settler instead of to one of the rangers.

“Let’s gie him a chance o’ his life ef he’ll tell all about it,” counseled Cully. “What d’ye say, cap?”

“I agree to that,” answered the captain. “He don’t appear to be worth shooting, though it may be as well to take him to the settlements and shut him up in a prison. The promise of his life may get out of him all he knows. If not, the other will. He’s not an Indian, and a bit of rope hooked round his neck will no doubt loosen his tongue. Suppose we try it, boys?”

The “boys” were unanimous in their assent, and the renegade was at once brought up for examination. The man in the green blanket coat, who, as a Santa Fe expeditioner, had spent over twelve months in Mexican prisons, was appointed the examiner. He had been long enough among the Mexicans to learn their language.

The renegade was for a time reticent, and his statements contradicting. No wonder he hesitated to tell what he knew, so compromising to himself. But when the lariat was at length noosed around his neck, the loose end of it thrown over the limb of a pecan tree—the other conditions being at the same time made known to him—he saw that things could be no worse; and, seeing this, he made confession, full, if not free.

Everything was disclosed that had occurred—the attack and capture of the caravan, the slaughter of the white men who accompanied it, and the retreat of two of them

to the cliff, one of whom, by the description, could be no other than Walt Wilder.

When the renegade came to describe the horrible mode in which their old comrade had perished, the rangers were almost frenzied with rage, and it was with difficulty some of them could be withheld from forswearing their promise and tearing the wretch to pieces.

He declared, however, he had taken no part in the cruel transaction, that none of his acts were voluntary, that although they had found him among the Indians, he was there only as their prisoner, and that they had forced him along with them.

This was evidently untrue; but, false or true, it had the effect of pacifying his judges so that the lariat remained loose upon his neck.

Further examination and cross-examination elicited everything except the strange alliance between the Mexican military and the despoilers of the caravan. Not thinking of this, how could they, his examiners, put any question about it; and the wretch, therefore, saw no reason to declare it. He might have had a hope of one day returning to the Del Norte and holding communication with Colonel Uraga.

"Boys," said the ranger-captain to his men, as soon as the examination was over, "you all loved Walt Wilder—all of you that knew him?"

"We did—we did!" was the response, feelingly spoken.

"So did I. Well, he's dead beyond a doubt. It's more

THE FORCED CONFESSION.

than a month ago, and he couldn't last that long shut up in a cave. His bones will be with those of the poor fellow, whoever he was, that went in along with him. It's dreadful to think of them tombed in that way. Now, from what the Mexican says, it can't be so very far from here, and as we can make him guide us to the place, I propose to go there, get out the bones of our old comrade, and give them burial."

With the Texan Rangers obedience to duty is less a thing of command than request; and this was a request that received an instant and unanimous assent.

"Let us go!" was the cry that came from all sides.

"We needn't all make this journey," continued the captain. "There's no need for any more than our boys, the rangers, and such of the settlers as may choose to go with us. The rest, who have got to take care of the women, and some for driving the stock, can make their way back to the Cross Timbers at once. We've left the track pretty clear of Indians, and they will be in no danger."

Without further discussion this arrangement was agreed upon, and the two parties commenced making the preparations suitable to their respective plans.

In less than two hours after they had separated—the settlers, with their women, children, and cattle, wending their way eastward, while the rangers, guided by the renegade, rode off in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SOLDIERS ON THE MARCH.

“What do you think they are?”

“Sogers, for sartint. I kin see the glint o’ ther buttons an’ ’couterments.”

“But what could soldiers be doing out here? There are no Indians upon the Staked Plain. Besides, if there were, such a small troop as that—considering they are Mexicans—would not be likely to venture out here after them.”

“It mout be only a advance gurd, an’ thar’s a bigger body o’ them behind. We’ll soon see. Anyways, we mustn’t let ’em spy us, till we know what sort o’ varmints they air. Yis, sogers they be—a troop o’ Mexikin cavalry. Thar’s no mistakin’ them ragamuffins. They’re lanzeers, too. I kin make out thar long spears, stickin’ up over thar heads, an’ the bits o’ ribbon streamin’ out behind. Pull yur mule well back among the bushes. The direcshun they’re follerin’ might fetch ’em clost to hyar. ’Twon’t do to let ’em git sight o’ us. Mexikins though they be, thar mout be danger in ’em. ’Tall events, it’s best to hev the advantage o’ fust knowin’ who they air, an’ what they’re arter.”

This brief dialogue occurred between two men standing beside two mules, from which they had just dismounted. They were Frank Hamersley and Walt Wilder.

The place was by the edge of a clump of stunted "black-jacks." It was about fifteen miles west from the valley of the Lone Ranch, from which they had ridden that morning. They were on their way to the settlements of the Rio Del Norte, for the purpose already declared by the young prairie-merchant.

The hour was midday, and they had stopped for their noon halt under the shade of the dwarf but umbrageous oaks, where they were enjoying the food their late host had provided for their journey.

While thus agreeably engaged, Walt's eyes, ever on the watch, had detected a suspicious sign, that appeared in a due westerly direction. At first it seemed only a cloud of dust, not bigger than a blanket. Gradually, however, it became more extended, and soared higher above the plain.

As the two men stood guessing as to its nature, shading their eyes from the sun overhead, all at once its true character became disclosed to them. A puff of wind coming down from the north caused the soaring cloud for a moment to sway sideways, showing underneath a body of mounted men. It was then that Walt Wilder saw the "glint" of accouterments that led him to pronounce it a party of "sogers."

That they were Mexican soldiers was easily detected.

There could be no other in that part of the country. It is true a band of Texan cavalry had once crossed the plains, at a point not very distant from where they were—the ill-starred “Santa Fe Expedition”—though few of these wore anything like a soldier’s uniform; besides, they did not carry weapons such as Walt now saw. The advancing party was evidently a troop of Mexican lancers, and could be nothing else.

If there had been any doubt about it, it was soon set at rest. As the hunter had observed, they were approaching in a direction to bring them close to the clump of oaks; and in less than half an hour after, they were nearly opposite it, the dust-cloud still shrouding and partially concealing them from view.

Still there was no difficulty in making out the character of the individual forms composing it. It was a small party of between twenty and thirty files, marching in fours. They were regular Mexican lancers, carrying their lances sloped, with the pennons dragging along the shafts, for there was not a breath of air to float them. Their yellow cloaks could be seen, folded and strapped over the croups behind them. Their horses were of the small Mexican mustang kind; but one that headed the troop, ridden by an officer, in all likelihood the leader, was a large animal, evidently a horse of American breed.

Upon this horse the eyes of Walt Wilder became fixed as soon as the animal was near enough to attract special observation.

A half-surprised, half-interrogative expression passed over his features as he gazed through the obscuring dust. Suddenly it became changed to one of certainty, while a loud exclamation leaped from his lips.

“Great Heaven! Frank, look thar!”

“What is it, Walt?”

“Don’t ye see nothin’?”

“Nothing more than what I see—a troop of Mexican lancers, mounted upon mustangs.”

“Mustangs! That’s no mustang, that ere critter at the head o’ the line. Amerikin hoss he is—*yur* hoss, Frank Hamersley!”

It was Hamersley’s turn to be astonished. Sure enough the horse ridden at the head of the troop was the same he had been compelled to abandon at the base of the cliff in their escape from the pursuing savages.

A flood of light flashed into the minds of the two men couching within the shadow of the black dwarf oaks. At once they recalled the suspicious circumstance observed by them in the fight—the bearded men among the Indians—and at the same time remembered what their late host had told them in relation to the ruffian Uraga.

Was it he who was leading the troop? Who else could it be?

They could see that the man who rode the large horse was tall and bearded, just as Hamersley knew Uraga to be, and just like the Indian whom Walt had suspected of being a counterfeit. Everything seemed to confirm the

conjectures they had dwelt upon. And now rushed other conjectures across the brain of both, with apprehensions that were almost agonizing. What was the purpose of this military expedition? Whither was it bound? As they saw it filing before their eyes, these questions were too easily answered. It was heading direct for the valley from which they had themselves come, and going as if guided!

"Yes," said Walt; "thar goin' straight for the valley, an' the Lone Ranch, too. Thar's no guess-work in that sort o' travelin'. Thar's a guide along wi' 'em, an' thar's been a treeter."

"Who could it be?"

"Who? Why, who but the Injun Manooel, as went off 'bout a week ago to fetch thar things. Durnashun! yonner's the skunk hisself. Don't you see that thing ridin' on a mule, near the head o' the line?"

Hamersley looked; and there, sure enough, was the figure of a man on muleback, differently dressed from the troopers. The dress was such as he had seen worn by the domestics of Miranda; and although the distance was too great for his features to be recognized, the dark complexion, with other distinctive points which the young Kentuckian remembered, left no doubt of his being the peon Manuel.

No further explanation was needed now. All was too painfully clear.

The peon had turned traitor, and disclosed the secret

of Colonel Miranda's place of exile. He was guiding the enemy direct to it.

Nor was there any required to conjecture what would be the result. Don Valerian was in danger, not only of his liberty, but his life. And along with him the doctor.

But it was not of either Frank Hamersley or Walt Wilder were at that moment thinking.

Close conjoined with their fate was that of others far dearer to them; and to the fate of these were their apprehensions turned, absorbing every thought.

Hamersley breathed hard as the dark shadow swept over his soul, and spoke excitedly, though his voice was husky, like that of a man in the act of being strangled. He gasped out:

"They're going straight for the Lone Ranch. Adela! Oh, Heaven!"

"Yes, they're boun' for thar," said Walt, in calmer voice, but speaking in a tone equally anxious and desponding. "That's thar errand out hyar for sartint. Then as polerticul refergees, an' ef the varmint at thar head be him as I've been told about, the Lord have mercy on M'rander! Poor young feller! he'm the noblest species o' Mexikin I ever see, an' deserves a better fate. Hang or shoot him they'll be sure. Thet's Amijo's way, when-somdever he or Sandy Andy's in the 'scendent. As for the poor ole doc, he may git off by sarvin' a spell in prison; but the *gurls*——"

Hamersley's groan interrupted the speech, his comrade seeing that it pained him.

"Wal, we won't speak o' them now. One thing, *they* ain't agoin' to be rubbed out like the men. From what the saynerita's brother sayed, thar's a reezun for treetin' her different; an' ef thar's to be no longer a brother to purtect her, I reck'n she's got a *friend* in you, Frank, an' hyar's another."

Walt's words sounded hopefully. Hamersley felt it, but said nothing. His thoughts were too sad for speech. He only pressed the hand of his comrade, in a silent grasp of gratitude.

"Yes," continued the ex-ranger, with increased emphasis; "I'd lay down my life to save that young lady from harm, an' I know you'd lay down yourn; an' that air to say nothin' o' Concheeter. As for yur gurl, Frank, I don't wonder your heart beats like a chased rabbit, for myen air doin' the same. Wal, never fear. If thar's a hair o' eyther o' thar heads harmed, you'll hear the crack o' this child's rifle, an' see its bullet go into the breast o' him as harms 'em, I don't care who or what he air, or whar he be. Nor I don't care a darn, not the valley o' a dried buffler-chip, what may come arter—hangin', garrotin', or shootin'. At all risk, them creeturs air boun' to be purtected, or revenged. I swar it by the Eternal!"

"I join you in the oath!" groaned Hamersley, in increased fervor, once more exchanging a hand-squeeze with his comrade. "Yes, Walt, the brave Miranda may be

sacrificed—I fear it will be so—but for his sister, there is still a hope of her being saved; and surely Heaven will help us. If not, I shall be ready to die. To me death would be easier to bear than the loss of Adela.”

“An’ wi’ this child the same, for Concheeter!”

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A HALT.

Frank Hamersley and the hunter-guide had truly divined the object of the military expedition, and who was its leader.

It was Uraga who was riding across the plain with a picked party of his lancers; their destination the valley of the Lone Ranch; and their purpose, to make prisoners of Miranda and all who might be found sharing the solitude with him.

The information given by the peon Manuel had been acted upon immediately, the expedition having started from Albuquerque before sunrise on the following day, and the traitor was now with it, acting as guide.

Uraga had brought only a small troop of his lancers—Lieutenant Roblez, his adjutant, in immediate command of them. The colonel commandant did not deem it necessary to make show of a larger force. Any Indians that might be encountered in that section of the country would be the Apaches, and of these he had no fear. About one hundred men in all filed after him—enough to make fast prisoners of four persons.

“I don’t think we need fear any resistance,” he remarked

to his subordinate, as the double-peaked hill loomed up over the level of the plain, and the guide informed them that the valley lay just beyond it.

“No,” rejoined the adjutant. “If there should be, what then?”

“Then we make clean work of it. No quarter to any of the men. Cut them down; lance the life out of them.”

“The old doctor, too?”

“Him as the rest. We want no survivors—at least of the male kind—to tell tales afterward. I only wish they would show fight. As you know, Roblez, there are reasons why they should be silenced. I’m sorry I’ve brought this horse with me. I didn’t think of it. They’ll be sure to remember him. Still, that can be explained by our saying that he was brought into the settlements, and I became his owner by purchase.”

“If you have any doubts that way, colonel, why not act as if they had resisted us?”

“It would be dangerous. Remember, adjutant, we’re not now acting with the Horned Lizard and his painted freebooters. Our fellows here have eyes in their heads and tongues between their teeth. A tale might get out that would bring us into disgrace with the government, and it into trouble with the Americans. No, no; we must not make fools of ourselves by such naked work as that. We make prisoners of them, if they give us no other pretext. After that, I’ve thought of a way of disposing of them. The Horned Lizard will help me, and I have now a mes-

senger on the way to him. As regards Don Valerian Miranda, he's safe enough. His affair can be arranged by a court-martial, that will act promptly, but withal, perfectly legal. Besides, there is a reason why I may not want him executed right off. I may yet save his life, if he will do something to deserve it."

"Ho, ensign!" he added, calling to the youngest commissioned officer of the troop; "that Indian Manuel, send the brute to the front here."

Manuel, who was riding in the rear, on being told that he was wanted, spurred his mule forward, and placed himself by the side of the colonel.

In the countenance of the Indian there was an expression of conscious guilt, such as may be seen in one not hardened by habitual crime. Now that he was drawing nigh the scene where those betrayed by him would suffer, he had more than once indulged in a train of reflections, tinged with regret for what he had done. Don Valerian had been a kind master to him, and the Donna Adela an unexceptionable mistress. He was bringing ruin to both.

Then would spring up thoughts of Conchita and her colossal sweetheart—now, as he knew, her betrothed husband; and the memory of that episode in the shadowy grove coming fresh before his mind, would again fire his soul with black jealousy, and sweep out of it every thought of regret or repentance. Even had these triumphed, it was too late. From the moment of his having parted with the information, he had lost the control of his secret; and

he to whom it had been communicated did not treat him with the slightest regard. The traitor was no longer acting as a voluntary guide. He performed his office with a sword pointed to his breast, or a pistol aimed at his head.

"Sirrah!" said the colonel, as he came up, "are those the two peaks of which you spoke?"

"The same, your excellency."

"And you say that the path leads between them?"

"Right down into the valley."

"You are sure there is no other?"

"No other that comes up to the plain here. Beyond where the Lone Ranch is, at the farthest end of the valley, as I've told your excellency, the stream runs out. It is through a canon, between very high cliffs. It goes on to the plains below; but it is a long way, and crooked."

"Could horses travel by it?"

"Surely they could. When I was out through it once with Don Valerian, we were both of us mounted—on mules. But horses could go, too; though it's full of rocks, and not easy for animals to make way."

"Can the canon be reached from the plain above?"

"No, your excellency; not anywhere. On either side the cliffs are hundreds of feet high above the water, and there's no slope to get down by. The only way one could travel it is by entering from the outside plain, and coming up or through the valley, and going down. That would be two days' journey, maybe more, your excellency."

"Enough!" said Uraga, apparently satisfied, and yet with a dissatisfied air. "Go back to your place, sirrah!"

The peon, making obeisance by raising the straw hat from his head, again fell into the rear of the troop.

"There's a question, Roblez," said the colonel, "what we had best do here. If we go down into this hole in broad daylight, we may have our long ride for nothing, and find it empty for our pains. From what Manuel has told me, the house can be seen from the defile through which we have to pass, and therefore the defile from the house and ourselves making the descent."

"That will never do, colonel."

"Certainly not. Since it appears there are two doors to this trap, the birds may escape out of one while we are closing the other. I know the sort of canon the peon speaks of. It's a very common kind on the edge of the Staked Plain. He says it can't be entered except from the plain below, or through the valley itself. I've no doubt he is right; and, therefore, what's to be done? Can you suggest anything, Roblez?"

"Could we not gallop forward and surround the ranch before they can get out?"

"Nothing of the kind. Down the defile there can be no galloping, from what the Indian has told me. On the contrary, it will be just as much as our horses can do to crawl down it. To cut off their chances of escape below would be the way to make sure of them. But it would take time—several days at the least."

"I think there's no need of that delay," said the adjutant, reflectingly. "We may avoid it by not entering the valley till after the sun has gone down. Then we can ride on to the Lone Ranch, and surround it in the darkness. As they are not likely to be expecting such distinguished guests, there can be no difficulty in surprising them. Let it be after midnight, when they will all be asleep, and the fair Adela no doubt dreaming of some one. Poor thing! she must have had a lonely six months of it amid these solitary scenes."

"Halt!" commanded the colonel, a dark cloud crossing his countenance, as if the words of his subordinate stirred up some unpleasant memory. "We shall do as you suggest, Roblez. Let the men dismount, ensign," he added. "Keep the horses under the saddle, and be ready to move forward at a moment's notice. See that the Indian guide is closely watched, and you may as well put manacles upon him."

After issuing these orders, Uraga himself dismounted, gave his horse to a trooper to hold, and then, along with his adjutant, Roblez, walked off to some distance from the troop, so that the two could perfect their plan without danger of their villainous ideas becoming exposed to the cognizance of their comrades.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

STALKING THE STALKERS.

The spot upon which the lancer-troop had halted was within view of the grove that gave concealment to the two Americans. Five miles lay between, in the clear atmosphere of the table-plain, looking less than three. The individual forms of soldiers could be distinguished, and the two men who had seated themselves apart. The taller of them was even identified as the commanding officer of the troop.

“If they’d only keep thar places till arter sundown,” muttered the hunter, “I ked settle the hul thing. This hyar gun, the doc has presented me, wi’ ’bout as good a shootin’-iron as I’d care to streetch my claws on, an’ most equal to my own ole rifle. I’ve gin her all sorts o’ a trial, down thar in the valley, an’ know she’s good for plum center at a hundred and fifty paces. Ef yonner skunks as air squattin’ out from the rest ’ud but jest stay thar till the shades o’ night ’ud gie me a chance o’ stealin’ up, thar’s one o’ ’em ’ud never see daylight agin.”

“Oh,” exclaimed Hamersley, with a sigh of despair, and yet half hopeful, “if they would but remain there till night, we might still head them into the valley and give warning.”

“Don’t you have any sech hopes, Frank ; thar’s no chance o’ that. I kin see what they’re arter by makin’ stop. They’ve made up thar mind not to ’temp goin’ inter the valley till they kin git a trifle o’ shadder aroun’ them. They think that if they’re seen afore they git up to the Lone Ranch, the poor critters might escape ’em ; an’ therefore they purpiss approachin’ the shanty unobserved by makin’ a surround o’ it. That’s thar game. Cunnin’ o’ them, too, for Mexicans.”

“Yes, that is what they intend doing, no doubt of it. Oh, Heaven ! only to think we are so near, and yet cannot give them a word—a sign of warning !”

“Can’t be helped. We must put our trust in Him that has an eye on all o’ us—same over the desert, purairas, an’ mountains as the people that air livin’ in large cities. Sartin, we must trust in Him, an’ let things slide a bit, jest as He may direct ’em. To go out from our kiver now ’ud be the same as steppin’ inter the heart o’ a puraira fire. Them fellers air mounted on swift horses, an’ ’ud ketch up wi’ these slow critters o’ mules in the shakin’ o’ a prong-horn’s tail. Thurfore, let’s lie by till night. ’Tain’t fur off now, an’ ef we see any chance to git down inter the valley, we’ll take advantage o’ it.”

Walt’s companion could make no objection to the plan proposed. There was no alternative but to accede to it, and the two remained watching the movements of the troop, now stationary upon the plain.

For several hours were they thus occupied, when the

sun began to throw elongated shadows on the surface of the ground. It still wanted an hour of its setting, when they saw the Mexicans again mount their horses and move onward.

“I told you so,” said Walt; “thar’s still all o’ ten miles atween them an’ the valley, an’ they’ve mezyured the time it’ll take ’em to git thur—an hour or so arter sundown. ‘Thar ain’t the shadder o’ a chance for us to creep ahead o’ ’em. We must keep the kiver till they’re clur out o’ sight.”

And they did keep the cover until the receding horsemen—for a long time presenting the appearance of giants under the magnifying *mirage*—gradually became shrunken to their natural dimensions in the cool air of the evening, at length fading from view under the purple gleaming of the twilight.

Not another moment did Hamersley and the hunter stay within the sheltering grove, but, springing into their saddles, pushed on after.

Night soon descending, with scarce ten minutes of twilight, covered the Staked Plain with an opaque obscurity, as if a shroud had been thrown over it.

There was no moon—not even stars in the sky; and the twin peaks that formed the portals of the valley-path were no longer discernable.

But Walt Wilder required neither moon, nor stars, nor mountain peaks to guide him for such a short traverse. Taking his bearings before starting from the grove, he

rode on in a course straight as the direction of a bullet from his own rifle, until the twin peaks came into view, darkly outlined against the leaden sky.

“We mustn’t go any furrer, Frank,” he said, suddenly pulling up his mule; “leastways, not astraddle o’ these hyar conspikorous critters. Whether them sogers hev goed down into the valley or no, they’re sartin to hev left some o’ the crowd ahint, by way o’ keeping century. Let’s picket the anymals out hyar, an’ creep forrard afut. Thet’ll gie us a chance o’ seein’ ’ithout bein’ seen.”

The mules were disposed of as Walt had suggested, and the dismounted men continued their advance. First walking erect, then in a bent attitude, then crouching still lower, then as quadrupeds upon all fours, and at length crawling like reptiles, they made their approach toward the defile leading down to the valley.

They did not enter it. They dared not. Before getting within the gape of its gloomy portals, they heard voices issuing therefrom.

They could see tiny sparks of fire—the red coal glowing upon ignited cigars. They could tell that there were sentries left there, a line of them stretching across the ravine, guarding it from side to side.

“It ain’t no use tryin’, Frank,” whispered Wilder; “ne’er a chance o’ our gettin’ through. They’re stan’in’ thick all over the groun’. I kin tell by thar cigars an’ palaverin’. A black snake kedn’t make way among ’em ’ithout bein’ seen.”

"Then what are we to do?" asked Hamersley, in a despairing whisper.

"We kin do nothin' now, 'ceptin' go back an' get our mules. We must move 'em out o' the way afore sun-up. 'Tain't no manner o' use our squattin' hyar. I kin tell what's been done. The main body's goed below. Then thar's surely some they've left to the gap. I guess it's all over wi' the poor critters in the ranch, or will be afore we ked do anythin' to help 'em. Ef they ain't kilt, they're captured by this time."

Hamersley could scarce hinder himself from uttering an audible groan. Only the dread danger restrained him.

"I say agin, Frank, 'tair no use our stayin' hyar. Anythin' we ked do must be did elsewhur. Let's go back for our mules, fetch 'em away, an' see ef we kin climb one o' these hyar mounds. Thar's a good skirkin' o' kiver on the top o' 'em. Ef the anymals can't git up, we kin leeve them in some ruvine an' go to the top ourselves. Thar we kin see all that passes. The skunks 'll be sartin to kum past in the mornin', bringin' thar prisoners. We'll see who's along wi' 'em, an' kin foller thar trail."

"I'm ready to do as you direct, Walt. I feel as if I had lost all hope."

"That be durned. Thar's allers a hope while thar's a bit o' breath in the body. Keep up heart, man. Think o' how we war 'mong them wagguns. That ought to strenthin' yur gizzern. Never say die till yur dead. Thet air the doctryne o' Walt Wilder."

As if to give an illustrative proof of it, Walt caught hold of his despairing comrade by the sleeve, and turned him round, and urged him back to the place where they had parted from the mules.

The animals were released from their pickets and led silently and in a circuitous direction toward the base of one of the hills. Its sides appeared to be steep for even a mule to scale them, but a boulder-strewn ravine offered a place for their concealment.

There they were left, their lariats affording sufficient length to make them fast to the rocks, while the usual precautions were adopted to prevent them from whinneying.

Having thus disposed of them, the two men kept on up the ravine, reached the summit, and sat down among the cedar-scrub that crowned it, determined to remain there till the morning sun should declare the "development of events."

CHAPTER XL.

THE SONG INTERRUPTED.

"Come, Adela; the doctor and I have been comparing notes, and have come to the conclusion that we're both a little out of sorts. Take your guitar, sister, and see if a song wouldn't cheer us."

"It's true what Don Valerian says. Your sweet voice will no doubt be of great service, and do much to cure the malady from which we are both suffering."

"What malady, dear doctor?" asked the young lady, looking at Don Prospero with some surprise.

"One of which you, *senorita*—fortunately for yourself—are not subject. Don't you see that neither of us is smoking? We haven't had a cigaritto in our mouths during the whole of this day."

"I have noticed that. But why, Don Prospero?—why, Valerian?"

"For the best of all reasons, sister—we haven't got such a thing. There isn't a cigaritto within twenty miles of where we sit—unless our late guests have made a very short day's journey. I gave the great Texan the last pinch of tobacco I had to cheer him on the way."

"Yes, *senorita*," added the doctor; "and something as

bad, if not worse. Our worthy friends, the Americans, have helped us in reducing our stock of wine. I believe it's about as low as the tobacco; so you see we stand in need of a song to cheer us. Fortunately, your sweet voice is left. Neither of the strangers has been able to deprive us of that."

A smile, and a significant twinkle in Don Prospero's eye, told that his last words had something of a double meaning.

"Oh," replied the senorita; "a song. Half a dozen, at your service."

And she turned toward her guitar, having hastily sprang up from her seat to conceal the slight blush which the doctor's speech had summoned into her cheeks.

"About the wine," said Miranda, "it's not quite so bad as you make it out, doctor, although the throat of the ranger appeared as difficult to saturate as the most parched spot upon the Staked Plain. However, there's still left to us a flask or two of the grape-juice—enough, I think, to keep us alive till Manuel makes his return with our monthly supplies. What can be delaying the rascal? He's had time to have been to Soccorro, done all his marketing, and got back three days ago. I hoped to see him here before our guests left, so that I could have better provisioned them for their journey. As it is, they run a fair risk of being famished. I did what I could to get them to wait for him, but Don Francisco would not. The noble fellow is in a sad state of mind about his murdered

companions, and no wonder. He says he cannot rest till he obtains satisfaction. I fear he will not find it where he has gone to seek it, but only get himself into a new danger. Ah! it is sad—horrible—to reflect on such a state of affairs.”

The reflection was evidently the same with Adela. As she sat listening to what her brother said, her eyes glowing with a somber solicitude, the guitar escaped from her hands and dropped to the floor, by the concussion breaking one of its strings.

It looked like an omen of evil, and a quick glance passing between them told that all three so regarded it.

Don Prospero hastened to pick up the guitar, and with a gallant speech to the senorita, commenced re-uniting the snapped string. As if to chase the unpleasant reflection still further away, he added:

“About provisioning your late guests for their journey, Don Valerian, I did that myself.”

“How do you mean, doctor?”

“You know that beautiful rifle I bought from the American merchant in Santa Fe?”

“Of course I do. You brought it here with you, and I know that you’ve lent it to our friend, the Texan.”

“No, I gave it to him. It was so grand to see how he could use it. He could kill a bird with it and not spoil the skin, or even ruffle a feather. I am indebted to him for some of my best specimens. So long as the ranger carries that gun, you need have no fear that either he or

his companion will perish from hunger—even on the Staked Plain. Now, Adela, I've set the string to rights, and we await your song."

The young girl took up her guitar, and commenced singing one of those inimitable lays for which the language of Cervantes is so celebrated.

It was a patriotic chant, intended to uplift the hearts of the two refugees in their solitary exile. Yet, despite its stirring strain, the hearts of those who listened to it could not help feeling sad, as if some boding fear still held possession of them. She who sang was under a similar influence, and in spite of all her efforts, her voice came not in its accustomed volume and sweetness, while the strings of the instrument seemed all out of tune.

Suddenly, while she was in the middle of the song, the two hounds, that had been lying upon the floor, sprang from their recumbent position, giving utterance to a fierce growl, and then rushed simultaneously through the open door.

The singing was at once suspended, while Don Valerian and the doctor rose hastily to their feet.

The bark of the watch-dog in some quiet farm-yard, amid the homes of civilization, can give no idea of the startling effect which the same sound creates on the Indian frontier. In the valley of the Lone Ranch it could not fail to cause alarm.

A hoof at that moment struck upon the stones outside—that of either horse or mule. It could not be Lolita's, for

the mustang mare was securely stalled at some distance off, and there were no other animals. Their late guests had taken the two saddle-mules—the only others being the mules sent away with the peon Manuel.

“It’s Manuel come back,” exclaimed the doctor. “We ought to be glad instead of scared. Come, Don Valerian, we shall have our cigaritto yet.”

“It’s not Manuel,” said Miranda; “the dogs would have known him before this. Hear how they keep on baying. Ha! what’s that? Chico’s voice! Somebody has got hold of him!”

A cry from the peon outside, succeeded by expostulations, as if he was struggling in some strong grasp, then becoming commingled with the shriller screams of Conchita, were sounds almost simultaneous.

Don Valerian rushed toward his sword, the doctor laying hold of the first weapon that came in his way.

But weapons were of no avail where there were not hands enough to wield them. In the rude log structure there were doors front and back, and through both poured a stream of men in uniform, armed with swords, pistols, and lances. Before Miranda could disengage his sword from the scabbard, a glittering line of lance-points were within six inches of his breast, while the good doctor was similarly menaced. Both saw that resistance would be idle; it could only end in their instant impalement.

“Surrender, rebels!” cried a commanding voice, rising

above the din. “Drop your weapons at once, if you wish your lives spared. Soldiers, disarm them!”

Miranda recognized the voice. Perhaps had he sooner heard it, he might have held on to his sword and taken the chances of a desperate struggle.

It was too late. Just as the weapon was wrested from his grasp he saw, standing in the door-way, the man he had most to fear—Gil Uraga.

CHAPTER XLI.

A NIGHT OF ANXIETY.

Frank Hamersley and Walt Wilder, concealed in the cedar-scrub, awaited the morning light to give them a revelation, not patiently, but with spirits chafing and agonized. They were alike interested in the story that the sun should reveal. Both had their passion, each in his respective way, each a loved one in danger.

Neither closed eye in sleep. With nerves terribly strung, and bosoms wildly agitated, they lay awake, counting the hours and questioning the stars.

They conversed but little, and that only in whispers. The night was profoundly still. They could distinctly hear the voices of their troopers left on picket below.

Hamersley, who understood their tongue, could even make sense of their conversation. It was ribald and blasphemous—boasts of their pleasant companionship with the dames of the Del Norte, and curses at the ill-starred expedition that was separating them from their sweethearts.

Later a luminous halo, stealing up to the summit of the mound, showed that they had struck a light, and shortly after the phrases, "*Soto en el puerto! Cavallo mazo!*" (The knave in the gate! The queen winner!) proclaimed

them engaged in the never-ending national game of "monte."

Until about midnight Frank Hamersley and the hunter listened to the calls and curses of the gamblers. Then other sounds reaching their ears, absorbed all their attention.

Up out of the valley on the elastic air came the baying of the blood-hounds, carried by reverberation along the face of the cliffs. Then, almost instantly after, a human voice, quickly followed by another. The first was that of Chico, the second Conchita.

All these sounds the listeners understood—could conjecture pretty closely their import.

"They're at the shanty now," muttered Walt. "The dogs hev gin tongue on hearin' 'em approach. That fust shout war from the Injun peon, an' the tother air hern—my gurl's. Durnation! Ef they hurt but a har o' her head—wagh! what's the use o' my talkin'?"

As if feeling his impotence, the hunter suddenly ceased speech, again bending his ear to listen. Hamersley, without heeding him, was doing this intently, his whole soul absorbed.

From the valley came up a confusion of voices, though none of them loud. The stream, here and there falling in cataracts, of itself caused a babel of sound. Only a shout or scream could have been heard above it.

There was no shout but that raised by the peon, no scream after the cries of Conchita had ceased; and, what

more than all tranquillized the spirits of the listeners, no report of fire-arms. A shot at that moment heard by Hamersley would have given him more uneasiness than if he had seen the gun or pistol, whence it proceeded, aimed at himself.

"Thank Heaven!" he gasped out, after a good time spent in listening, "Miranda has made no resistance. He saw it would be of no use, and has quietly surrendered. It must be all over now, and they are captives."

"Wal, better that than they shed be corps," was the consolatory reflection of the hunter. "So lng as thar's breath left in thar bodies we kin hev a hope, as I sayed arready. Let's keep up our hearts, Frank, by thinking o' thet fix atween the wagons, an' the scrape in the cave. We've got clur o' them in a way this child 'ud call mirakel-us, and we may yet get *them* clur in somethin' o' the same fashion. S'long's we've got our claws over a kupple o' good rifles we shed niver say *die*. Thet's my readin' o' it."

The hunter's speech was encouraging, but for all that it did not hinder him or his comrade from falling soon after into despondency.

When the day broke, with eyes keenly scrutinizing, they looked down into the valley. A mist hung over the stream, sprung from the spray of its cascades. It lifted at length, and displayed to them no more than they had been expecting.

Around the ranch horses standing picketed, men roving about in uniform—a picture of military life in "country

quarters." Their point of view was too far off for them to note individual forms or the actions being carried on. These last were left to conjecture—to them agonizing.

They had to endure torturing suspense for long hours—up to that of noon. Then the notes of a bugle, rising clear above the hissing of the cascades, foretold a change in the spectacle. It was the call of "boots and saddles." The men were seen caparisoning their horses and standing by the stirrups.

Another bugle-strain gave the order to "mount," and soon after the "forward." Then the troop in line was seen filing off, disappearing under the trees, like some gigantic serpent, white drapery fluttering around its head, as if the reptile had seized upon some tender prey—a dove from its cote—and was bearing it off to its slimy lair.

CHAPTER XLII.

A TEMPTATION RESISTED.

For fully twenty minutes the two men waited with nervous impatience. It required this time to make the ascent from the ranch to the upper plain. After entering among the trees, the soldiers and their captives were out of sight, but the clattering of the horses' hoofs could be heard, as they struck upon the rock-strewn path that led upward from the ravine. Once or twice a trumpet sounded, telling of the progress of the troops.

At length, its head came in sight, and soon after the leading files, following single, one after the other as they ascended along the narrow ledge.

As the path became more open between the twin mounds the formation changed into twos, though a single horseman still held the lead.

Presently he was near enough for his features to be distinguished, and Hamersley's heart struck fiercely against his ribs as he recognized them. If there had been any doubt before, it was settled now. His antagonist in the duel, Gil Uraga. And, equally past doubt, the man who had conducted the attack upon his caravan and killed his comrades. His horse, now bestridden by the ruffian, was proof.

He was got up in splendid style, very different from the dust-stained cavalier who the day before had passed over the plain. Now he appeared in a gorgeous laced uniform, with lancer cap and plume, gold cords and aiguillettes dangling over his breast. He had that morning made his toilet with care, in consideration of the company in which he intended to travel.

Neither Hamersley nor the hunter kept his eyes long upon him. They were both looking for another object—each his own. These soon made their appearance, their loose drapery distinguishable amid the troop. They were at the head of the line, riding side by side, the young lady upon her own horse, Lolita, and the Indian damsel on a mule. They were free, both hand and limb, but two lancers, close following, had evidently the charge of keeping an eye upon them.

Some files further rearward was another group, more resembling captives. This was composed of three men upon mules, all fast bound to saddle and stirrup, two of them having their arms pinioned behind their backs. Their animals were led each by a trooper preceding it. The two about whose security so much care had been taken were Don Valerian and the doctor, The third, with his arms left free, was the peon, Chico. His fellow-servant, Manuel, also on muleback, was following not far behind, but in his demeanor there was nothing of the prisoner. If he looked gloomy, it was from thinking of his black treason and ingratitude. Perhaps he may have

by this time repented, or more likely the prospect was not so cheerful. After all, what would be his reward? He had ruined his master and several others besides. But that would not win him the respect of Conchita.

Hamersley felt some little relieved as Don Valerian came in sight, and more as the march brought him nearer, and he could perceive no sign of his being wounded. The elaborate fastenings were of themselves evidence that no injury had yet befallen him. It was a struggle of resistance, ending in his being cut or shot down, they had most dreaded; and what they now knew of Uraga made it quite probable that he would have sought a pretext for it. As Don Valerian was still alive, and being carried off a prisoner, his enemy had perhaps some other purpose.

One by one, and two by two, the troop came filing on, till its leader was opposite to where Hamersley and Walt were concealed among the cedars. Well screened by the thickly set branches, and the dark dense foliage that covered them, they could note every movement passing below. The distance was about two hundred yards on a down-slanting direction.

When the lancer colonel came up to where the picket had been posted, he halted and gave an order. It was for the guards to fall in along with the rest of the troops.

At this moment a similar thought was in the minds of the two men watching him from the top of the mound. The hunter was the first to give speech. He did it in a whisper:

“Ef I ked trust the carry o’ this rifle, or yourn eyther.”

“I was thinking of it,” was the reply, also in a whisper; “I’m afraid it’s too far.”

“If we ked pick *him* off it ’ud simperfly matters consid’able. ’T all events, it ’ud get your gurl out o’ danger, an’ in coorse both on ’em. I b’lieve the hul on ’em wuld run at hearin’ a shot. Then we ked give ’em a second, an’ load an’ fire half a dozen times afore they ked mount up hyar, ef they’d dare to try it. I reck’n it’s too fur. The distance in these hyar high purairies is despurt deceivin’. Durned pity we kedn’t make sure.”

“We couldn’t. We might miss, and then——”

“Things ’ud only be wus. I reck’n we’d better let ’em slide now, an’ follow arter. Thar boun’ straight for the Del Nort; but whether or no we kin eesy pick up thar track.”

Hamersley still hesitated, his fingers nervously tightening on his gun, and then relaxing. His thoughts were flowing in a quick current—too quick for cool deliberation. He knew he could trust his own aim, as well as that of his comrade, but the distance was doubtful, and both might miss. Then it would be certain death to them, for the place was such that there would be no chance to escape, with a hundred lancers riding after them, they themselves mounted on two poor mules. These could now be reached without difficulty and danger. Even if they could defend themselves for the moment, it could not be for long. Two against a hun-

dred, they must in time be overpowered. He could not believe what Walt had said—that the troopers would run after the second shot. Not likely, even if their leader should fall at the first.

Besides, Uraga was carrying his prisoners to New Mexico—to Albuquerque, of course. He and his comrade were Americans, and not proscribed there. They could follow, and watch the development of events. Some better opportunity might arise for a rescue. A Mexican prison might offer this, and, from all he knew, would.

Only one thought hindered him from giving way to this reasoning—the thought of Adela traveling in such company, under such an escort worse than unprotected.

Once more he scanned the distance that separated him from Uraga, his gun tightly grasped.

Had the lancer-colonel suspected his proximity at that moment, and what was passing in his mind, he would have sat less pompously in his saddle.

Patience, backed by prudence, asserted its claim, and the grasp on the gun was again relaxed.

The lancer-troop, filing up the gap, formed into a more compact order of march, and then struck off over the plain in the direction whence they had come.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A STRAGGLER PICKED UP.

Hamersley and the Texan kept close to their places of concealment on the top of the hill. To have descended to the plain would have been to discover themselves to the eye of any lancer who might be looking back. Even to go down to their animals would risk this, for the ravine where they had left them opened westerly.

It was a rigorous necessity for them to remain where they were until the troop had got ten miles off, for in that pure atmosphere a horseman, magnified by the mirage, might be sighted at this distance. Though they would be mounted on Mexican mules, the Texan's tall figure would make up for the defect in the dimensions of his animal.

There was no help for it but to keep their place till the time should arrive for leaving it. It made not much difference, as, after starting along the track, they would have to keep the same distance.

As the troop had gone off in the ordinary measured walk, and was still continuing this tardy pace, their patience would be tried for at least two hours. Now no longer in dread of being observed, Walt took out his pipe, while Hamersley lit a cigar—one of those with which his

late host had provided him, without telling him they were the last. The spirits of both were depressed to the deepest gloom; the nicotine might some little relieve them. They had not been smoking more than a minute, when a sound reaching their ears caused both of them to start. It came from below, and at first they thought it might be one of their own mules kicking against the rocks, for it resembled this. But on listening they heard it again, and could tell that it did not come from that side. Still was it like a hoof-stroke either of horse or mule. It evidently ascended out of the gap from which the lancers had lately passed.

Once more creeping back to their point of observation, and craning their necks outward, they looked below. There they saw what surprised them not a little—a man leading a mule out from behind a huge boulder of rock that lay in the gap.

At a glance they recognized the man—Manuel, the traitor. He appeared to be proceeding by stealth, casting apprehensive looks in the direction in which the troopers had ridden off, as if to assure himself that they were all gone. It was evident that he had concealed himself and his mule behind the boulder, with the intention of staying till they were out of sight.

But what could be his motive, purpose, or object? This was the puzzle to those who now looked down upon him. They did not dwell upon it scarcely for an instant. It was at once apparent that their object could be best served by

getting their hands upon the traitor—not to kill, but to make him confess.

The difficulty was how to do this without being discovered by the departing troop, still less than a mile off. It was just possible they could scramble down the side of the mound that faced the gap. It was steep, but not precipitous. Going that way they would not be seen by the soldiers; but they would by the man himself long before they could reach him, and as he had now mounted his mule, he could easily gallop off and rejoin the troop. This would be their undoing.

While they were considering what was the best course to pursue, a movement on the part of the peon relieved them from all uncertainty.

Instead of heading his mule upward toward the plain, he turned it in the opposite direction, and commenced moving down into the valley. They saw this with surprise, for they could not guess his purpose. No matter; there was a chance now of laying hold of him and making him declare it.

As soon as he had turned the angle of the cliff that concealed the downward path from their sight, they commenced the descent of the slope. They did not think of going to get their mules, for that route was still interdicted. In the chase they were now entering on, they would have no need of them—better indeed without them, since the path into the valley could be traversed quicker afoot than on muleback.

They reached the bottom of the ravine, and there paused before continuing the pursuit. They only stopped to consider what would be the best way to make sure of their man. They did not wish to shoot him; that would defeat their purpose, besides risking their own safety. Borne upward on the tranquil air, the crack of a rifle might yet reach the ears of the receding troop.

“I’ll tell you how,” said the ex-ranger, to whom this sort of thing was a professional specialty. “You stay hyar, Frank, an’ let me foller him down. He’s agoing back to the ranch for some purpiss, an’ I reck’n we’ve got him in the trap. Jess squat about that ’ere rock, an’ see he don’t pass ye out hyar. I’ll grab him afore he kin git out by the other eend, ef he mean that, which for sartin he don’t. The ranch are what he’s arter, an’ I’ll git him thar, if not sooner. Keep your ears open, an’ when ye hear me give a wheef o’ a whissel ye kin foller down.”

Hamersley saw the rationality of this plan, and at once signified his approval of it by placing himself behind the rock—the same boulder where the peon had made his hiding-place. Without another word, Walt started down the ravine, and was soon lost to his comrade’s sight, disappearing round the projecting angle of the cliff.

The young Kentuckian was not kept waiting a very great while—only about twenty minutes. Then the promised “wheef” came up from the valley—loud enough to be distinguished above the sound of the cascades, but not to be heard far off on the plain. From the direction, he

could tell it was sent from the ranch, or somewhere near it; and, without losing a moment, he hastened down toward it.

On reaching the ranch, just as he expected, he found Manuel in the clutches of the Texan—not exactly in his grasp, but lying upon the ground beside him, with a rope around his ankles, and another binding his wrists.

“I ked a caught the skunk a leetle sooner,” Walt said, “but I was kewrous to find out what he was arter. Hyer’s the explecation o’ it.”

He pointed to a large bag lying near, with the contents half poured out of it—a rich array of jewelry and fancy articles, suggesting a cornucopiæ spilling his fruits and flowers. Hamersley recognized some of the articles as part of the property of his late host.

“Stolen plunder!” said Walt; “that’s what it air; an’ stole from a master as he’s betrayed—maybe to death—an’ a mistress that’s been too kind to him. Darnation! thar’s a tortess-shell comb as belonged to my Conchita, an’ a pair o’ slippers I ken swar war hern. What shall we do wi’ him?”

“What we intended,” said Hamersley, assuming a serious air. “Make him confess, and when we have got his story out of him, we shall think about what next.”

The confession was not very difficult to extract. With Walt Wilder’s bowie-knife gleaming before his eyes, its blade held within six inches of his ribs, the wretch revealed all that had passed, since the moment of his first

meditating treason. He even made declaration of the motive, knowing the nobility of the men who threatened him, and thinking by this means to obtain pardon.

To strengthen his chances, he went still further, turning traitor against him to whom he had lately sold himself—Uraga. He had overheard a conversation between the Mexican colonel and Lieutenant Roblez. It was to the effect that they did not intend to take Colonel Miranda all the way back to Albuquerque. How they meant to dispose of him he did not know. He had only half overheard the conversation.

About the senorita he had heard something, too, but did not understand it.

Hamersley could only supply the blank with dread, dire imaginings.

CHAPTER XLIV.

OLD ACQUAINTANCES.

While they were deliberating what to do with their prisoner, and a good deal puzzled about it, a sound reached their ears—first those of Walt Wilder, and then of his comrade—that caused both to start and turn pale.

There could be no mistaking it for aught else than the trampling of horses—of many horses; and they could have no other thought than that the lancer troop had returned into the valley and were approaching the place where they stood.

Instinctively they retreated inside the ranch, without taking their prisoner along with them. He was so tied he could not stir from the spot, and if he did, what difference would it make? Their horoscope was a fight on the defensive; and the hut, with its stout timber walls, was the best place they could think of for maintaining it. It had two doors—one front and back—both of heavy slabs, split stems of the palmetto. They were made strong and to shut close, for grizzly bears sometimes strayed around the ranch.

They were quickly slammed to and barred, and then the two men took their stand, each by a window, these

being but apertures in the log wall of small dimensions. With eyes keenly bent, and communicating to each other what they heard, the two stood to await the expected appearance of the enemy.

It was strange, too. The hoof-strokes heard did not seem to come down the valley, but in the opposite direction. Still, this might be a deception of sound caused by the echo of the cliffs.

The question would soon be solved; and with beating hearts and bated breath, they awaited the solution.

Presently other sounds fell upon their ears to those already reaching them—the voices of men. This was to be expected; but again they believed, or fancied, that it was up the valley, and not down, the horses and men were coming.

As they listened, laughter became commingled with the voices, hitherto heard only in conversation—laughter, and loud peals like the neighing of horses. It was altogether unlike what might, would, or could have issued from Mexican throats, while at the same time it was not the laughter of the Indian.

While they were cudgeling their brains to arrive at an elucidation of the mystery, a tableau was displayed before their wondering gaze that saved them all further trouble.

In front of the ranch was a tract of open ground of about three or four acres in extent, in the center of which was the lakelet already spoken of, at the lower end of

which the stream swept outward among trees. From under the shadow of these came riding out a string of horsemen, one after the other, until between forty and fifty had deployed upon the bordering plain.

There they halted, within short gun-shot of the dwelling, and appeared to gaze upon it with surprise—almost wonder. Only for a moment, while a word or two passed between them, after which they came riding in toward it. Through their loop-hole-like windows Walt Wilder and Hamersley had a clear view of them as they approached. There was not the slightest possibility of mistaking them for the troop whose return they had been dreading. No two bodies of mounted men could have presented a more dissimilar appearance.

Instead of the little mannikin Mexicans, mounted on their gingerly mustangs, the horsemen now approaching, as well as their steeds, were gigantic in contrast; while their dress, arms, and accouterments, horse-gear, and everything else, were as unlike those of Uraga's lancers as a bear to a monkey.

Whatever effect their appearance may have had upon Hamersley, it was to the eye of Walt Wilder a familiar tableau; and so pleasing, that at the first sight of it, when fairly displayed on the open ground, he sprang to the door, kicked out the bar, and drew the slabs back, half detaching them from their hinges. In another instant he was outside, Hamersley following him.

“Dog-gone my cats!” was the exclamatory phrase that

broke from his lips as he cleared the threshold of the cabin. "Fire an' scissors! what's this? Is Walt Wilder in a dream? Why, Frank, look thar? Thar's Ned Haynes o' the Texan Rangers, my ole captin; an' thar's Nat Cully—an' durn it! thar's the hul kumpany!"

"Walt Wilder!" cried a score of voices; while the men who gave utterance to them seemed for the moment to stand aghast, as if a specter had appeared to them; then, riding rapidly up, they surrounded him.

"What does this mean, Walt?" asked the captain of the Rangers.

"That's jess what I want ter know. What air ye doin' away hyar? What fetched ye, boys?"

"Why, you. We came to bury you!"

"Bury *me*!"

"Yis, hoss," said Cully, leaping from his horse and giving his old comrade a prairie embrace. "For that purpiss we kim ex-press. And as I know'd ye hed a kindly feelin' torst yur ole shootin'-iron, I've brought it along, intendin' to lay it in the grave aside o' ye."

As Cully spoke he handed a gun to Walt, who at once recognized the rifle he had been compelled to abandon when pursued by the Indians.

"This don't make things much clarer," said Walt. "Come, fellurs, explain yurselves. I see it's my ole gun, but how did ye git purseshun o' her? That's what purplexes this child. Talk plain, Cully. Tell us what's all about."

“Wal,” said Cully, “I reck’n it’s you as oughter tell us that. Our story air that we kim acrost a party o’ Tenawa Kimunch, under a chief they called Horned Lizard. He hain’t no more now, as he’s wiped out, ’long wi’ the majority o’ his band. *We* did that, down on Pee-cawn Crik. On his parson, arter he war throw’d in his tracks, we foun’ this rifle, which I know’d to be yourn. Sartint, we thort somethin’ hed happened to ye; but we kedn’t tell, hevin’ no sign or float-stick to give us a hint o’ yur wharabouts. Chanced we hed captered a Mexikin renegade—thet possum ye see out thar. He war jeined in Horned Lizard’s lot, an’ he’d been ’long wi’ ’em sometime. So we fit a loose laryette roun’ his thropple, an’ on the promise o’ its gittin’ tighter, he tolt us the hul story—how they hed attacked an’ plundered a carryvan, an’ all ’bout entoomin’ you an’ a kimrade who war wi’ ye. Our bizness out hyar war to look up yur bones an’ gi’e ’em a more Christyun kind o’ berr’l. We war on the way, the rennygade guidin’ us. He said he ked take us a near cut up the gully through which we’ve jess come—the which, I take it, air one o’ the heads o’ the Red River. Near cut! Dog-gone it! he’s been righter than I reck’n he thort o’. ’Stead o’ yur bones, thar’s yur body, lookin’ as big as ever. Now, Walt, we want yur side o’ the story, the which appears to be a du’ned deal more o’ a unexplainable mistry than ourn. So open yur head, ole hoss, an’ less hear it.”

Brief and graphic as was Cully’s narrative, it took Walt Wilder still less time to put his former associates in pos-

session of what had happened to him and the young man he now introduced to them as having been his companion in the closed cave. It was not the occasion to dwell upon details, either of that tragedy or the incidents succeeding it. They were chapters of the past; and there was one in the future yet unfinished that demanded immediate attention.

CHAPTER XLV.

FURTHER CROSS-QUESTIONING.

The arrival of the rangers at that moment was certainly a contingency of the strangest kind. Ten minutes later and they would have found the ranch deserted, for Hammersley and Walt Wilder had made up their minds to start, taking the traitor along with them. The Texans would have discovered signs to tell of recent occupation by a large body of men, and from the tracks of shod horses these skilled trailers would have known they had not been Indians. Still they would have made some delay around the ranch, and encamped in the valley for the night. This they declared to have been their intention, for their horses were jaded by the expedition having been extended beyond its original purposes, and they themselves had suffered severe fatigue in making their way up the canon, which led out to the lower plain, nearly twenty miles of most difficult travel.

In going out above, next morning they would have discovered the trail of the Mexican soldiers; but, although these were their sworn enemies, they might not have been tempted to follow them. The start of nearly twenty-four hours, their own animals in but poor condition, the likeli-

hood of a large body of the lancers being near, these considerations might have weighed with them, and they would have continued on to the spot to which the renegade was guiding them—a course leading northward, and altogether different.

A singular coincidence then, their coming up at that exact time. It seemed the hand of Providence opportunely extended; and this Hamersley held it, as did also the hunter.

Briefly as might be, they made known to the newcomers the circumstances in which they were placed. Their cause was at once unceremoniously espoused by the rangers. The voices in its favor were uttered with an energy and warmth that gave Hamersley a world of hope. Here were friends whose enemies were their own. And there was sufficient of them to pursue Uraga's troop, and destroy it. They might overtake it before night; or, if not, on the morrow; or, if not then, they would pursue it to the confines of New Mexico—to the banks of the Del Norte itself.

Hamersley's heart was no more depressed. A plan for rescuing his friend Don Valerian from death, and saving Adela, his own sweetheart, from dishonor, was no longer a thing unfeasable—no more an apparent impossibility; there was now more than a probability, and almost a certainty of their success.

To the Texans, the proposal came like an invitation to a ball, or a frontier fandango. Excitement was the very

breath of their life, a fight with the Mexican foeman their joy, a pursuit of him in any case their supreme delight. But pursuit such as this, having for its object not only the defeat of a hated enemy—far more hated than the Indian, because far more despised on account of his poltroonery—but the recovery of the captives, beautiful female captives, such as their old comrade Walt enthusiastically described them—this was the very thing to rouse them to vigorous resolve, and stir up in their hearts the spirit of border romance—that spirit that had made them rangers.

Notwithstanding their newly enkindled enthusiasm, the rangers did not act rashly.

Haynes, their captain, was an old “Indian fighter,” and one of the most experienced leaders of Texan border warfare, long continued.

Despite Hamersley’s natural wish to start at once on the pursuit, he counseled prudence; and Walt, of less fiery impatience, also inclined to this course.

“But why should we lose a moment?” inquired the hot-blooded Kentuckian; “they cannot yet be more than five miles off. We may overtake them before the going down of the sun.”

“That’s just what we oughtn’t to do,” rejoined the ranger chief. “Suppose they get sight of us before we are near? On the naked plain you speak of, they’ll be sure to do it. What then? Their horses, I take it, are fresh compared with ours. They might gallop off and leave us

to look after them like so many fools. Have time, too, to take their prisoners along with them."

This last speech settled the question with Hamersley, and he no longer made opposition.

"Let the sun go down," continued the Texan captain; "that's just what we want. Since they're bound due west I reckon we can easily keep on their trail, clear night or dark one. There's Nat Cully can do that; and if our friend Walt hasn't been spoiled by his late visit to the settlements, I take it he can still be trusted for the same."

The ranger and ex-ranger, both listening, remained modestly silent.

"Our plan will be," continued the captain, "to surround them in the night, and so make sure of them. They'll have a camp, and these Mexican soldiers will be sure to keep fires burning late—if it's only to give them light for their card-playing. That'll guide us to their squatting-ground."

The captain's scheme seemed so sensible that no one opposed it; and in words Hamersley signified his assent.

It was resolved to remain another hour in the valley, and then start for the upper plain. An hour would give the Texans time to recruit their horses on the sweet gramma-grass, and themselves on the game they had killed before entering the canon, which hung plentifully over the croups of their saddles, in the shape of wild turkeys, venison, buffalo, and bear meat.

The fires in the ranch, and those that had been kindled

by the soldiers around it, yet smoking, were replenished, and the abandoned cooking utensils once more called into use. But pointed saplings and the iron ramrods of their yager rifles—the ranger's ordinary spit—were in more demand; and broiling became the order of the day.

Now, with more time, and a better opportunity to compare notes with their new associates, Hamersley and the hunter-guide discussed some facts relating to their own disaster, hitherto unknown or obscure to them. The most important of these was one less surprising to themselves than the Texans. It was the confirmation of a suspicion to which their thoughts had been already directed, as well from their own experience and observations as from the suggestions thrown out by their late host. It was the connection of Uraga with the attack upon their caravan. They did not now need much for the confirmation of it. The possession of Hamersley's horse by the lancer-colonel was evidence circumstantial enough. But there was now a chance of having it direct—from the lips of the Mexican renegade, who must know all about the affair. He was once more put into the witness-stand, the lariat around his neck, its loose end over the limb of a tree. He at first lied point-blank, then equivocated, and at length, reflecting that in time it would be found out, and his life forfeited for not telling the truth, he made a clean breast of it—keeping back only the fact of his own agency, as a go-between of the two scoundrels—the white savage and the red.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A "NORTHER."

When the rangers heard the tale of atrocity in all its completeness, their rage, already sufficiently excited, became almost ungovernable; and it was as much as their leader could do to restrain them from at once starting on the pursuit. Some of them even dropped their roast ribs half eaten, demanding to be led on.

The counsels of the more prudent prevailed; but it was not long after till most, if not all, believed this prudence to be misplaced.

Grievingly Hamersley did so, and he had reason.

It arose from a circumstance entirely unsuspected. While they were still in the midst of their meal, the sky that had been all the morning of cerulean brightness, became suddenly clouded—not clouded as this term is understood in the ordinary sense, but absolutely black, as if the sun had been extinguished, or had dropped down from the heavens. The change somewhat resembled a total eclipse, though still darker, and the darkness had come on more rapidly. It could not have been more than five minutes from the commencement till the obscurity had reached completeness.

Though troubled, chagrined, by the appearance, there were few who beheld it with surprise. None of the old prairie men were in any way astonished, for they knew what it meant. At the first portentous sign, Cully sprang to his feet, crying out :

"A tornado—a *norther*!"

Walt Wilder had observed it at the same time, and confirmed the prognostic of his old ranger friend. This was before any of the others had noticed anything strange in the aspect of the sky, and when there was just the suspicion of a shadow flawing over the sun's disk.

All the Texans understood the significance of the word "norther"—a storm or tornado, usually preceded by a hot, stifling atmosphere, with drifting dust-clouds, accompanied by sheet or forked lightning, and roaring, terrific thunder, followed by wind and rain, sometimes hail or sleet, as if the sluices of heaven were set open, ending in a blast of more regular direction, but chill as though direct from the Pole.

In less than ten minutes after first seeing its sign, the storm was upon them. Down into the valley poured the dust, swept from the surface of the upper plain; along with it the leaves and stalks of the artemisia and other weeds of the desert.

Soon after followed the wind, at first in low sighs, like the sound of a distant sea, then roaring against the rocks, and swooping down among the trees, whose branches went crashing before its blast. Then the lightning, the thunder,

and the rain—the last falling, not in drops but sheets, as if projected from a spout.

For shelter the rangers rushed inside the ranch, leaving their horses to take care of themselves. The latter stood cowering under the trees, neighing with affright, the mules among them giving note to their plaintive whinny. There were dogs, too, that howled and barked, and other sounds that came from farther off, from the wild denizens of the forest—the screams of the cougar, the coyote, and the eagle; the snorting of alarmed bears, and the hooting of scared owls.

Crowded within the hut, so thickly as to leave only standing room, the men waited for the calming down of the storm. They could do so with the more patience knowing it would not long continue. It was not their first experience of a "norther."

The only thought that troubled them was the delay—their being hindered from starting in the pursuit. True, the party to be pursued would suffer from a like interruption; they would have to come to a stop during the storm, and the interval of distance would remain the same.

But their tracks would be obliterated—every vestige of them. The wind, the rain, the dust would do this. If out of sight, as by this time they would be, how was their trail to be followed?

They were going due west, or nearly so. Nearly! The deflection of a single point upon the prairies—above all on the Staked Plain—would leave the traveler like a ship

at sea without compass—to steer by guess-work, or go by chance.

The only consoling reflection was, that the Mexican lancers would make halt and stay till the storm was over. They had some light baggage—a tent or two, with other camp equipage. This was learned from the peon, twice turned traitor; and Hamersley as well as Wilder had themselves made note of it. As on their part there appeared to be no particular reason for haste, they would not be likely to resume their march till the sky was quite clear, and therefore gain nothing on distance. And as after the storm their track would be more distinct than ever, by reason of the rain and the moist ground on which the hoof-tracks must be imprinted, all needed would be for the pursuers to deploy and strike the trail farther on. Time might be lost in all probability, but it was a hundred miles to the nearest Mexican settlement, and they could still hope to overtake Uruga long before he reached it. He would have to get into the heart of the settlements ere he could count on the safe keeping of his prisoners. This at least was the reflection of those who contemplated pursuing them.

Fortified by this assurance, spoken by the sager ones of the party, the rangers remained inside the ranch, upon the roof of which the rain was still pouring down, without experiencing any very keen pangs of impatience.

Walt Wilder himself did not show any terrible discontent. Whatever might be the danger of Don Valerian and

the others, his Conchita was not quite so much exposed. The little brown-skinned damsel was not on the proscribed list; and the great hunter, strong in the belief that he had her heart, as he had the promise of her hand, was less apprehensive of consequences.

Besides, he was now in the midst of his old comrades, and the exchange of histories and reminiscences was sufficient to fill up the time and tranquillize its longings.

Hamersley alone was really unhappy. Despite all the assurances spoken and the hopes felt, there was yet much uncertainty—enough to keep apprehension on the strain.

His uneasiness, however, was still endurable, and only passed this point when a thought came into his mind—a memory that flashed across his brain as if a bullet had struck him between the temples. It was a mental shock that caused him to start, at the same time uttering a strange cry.

"What is it, Mr. Hamersley?" asked the ranger captain, who was standing close by his side.

"Great Heaven!" exclaimed the young Kentuckian; "I had forgotten. We must start at once, or we shall be too late—too late!"

The lightning still flashed, the thunder rolled, the winds bellowed, and the rain swept down as sluice-like as ever.

The men wondered. Some of them thought the prairie-merchant had gone mad.

What could he mean? Haynes and several others, speaking at the same time, demanded an explanation.

It was instantly given, and in as brief terms as possible.

The path leading up to the plain for a portion of the way traversed the channel of the stream. When this became swollen, as at long intervals it did, by a rain-pour such as that now detaining them, there was no egress from the valley. The stream became a turbulent torrent, remaining so till the waters went down. Neither horse nor man could stem it; and the cliffs closing chine-like each side, left no possible path. It was the same with the canon below, up which the rangers had themselves come. Any one caught in the valley during a storm must remain there till the flood subsided.

Hamersley had been told all this by his late host, but up to that instant he had not thought of the circumstance. The exciting scenes that preceded had caused him to forget it.

"An' me, too; I forgot it!" came a voice from among the crowd, and from a head over-topping them all, recognizable as that of Walt Wilder.

"Darnation, it's all true—the ole doc tolt this child the same. Boys, we've got to put out from hyar right smart, ef we mean to retch the upper story o' the Staked Plain inside o' forty-eight hours. Rain or shine, storm or no storm, it's got to be did, an' hyar's one as starts for the doin' o' it."

As the giant spoke, he commenced elbowing his way through the crowd, making for the door, where Hamersley had already preceded him.

The example was electric, though it needed not that. Every man of them had now a clear comprehension of what was meant; and despite the pelting rain, they rushed out into the open ground, and ran toward their horses.

Fortunately, there were two or three supernumerary steeds, which the Texans had picked up on the outside plains and brought along with them. This gave the opportunity for all to be mounted—not omitting the renegade or the traitor.

Quick as at the call of a cavalry bugle, the men were mounted, and going at full gallop up the valley path, regardless of the rain, reckless of the blast blowing in their teeth. Knowing the way and guiding it, Hamersley and the hunter rode at the head, the captain of the rangers and Cully after, the rest stringing out behind.

The place was reached where the stream, coming from between the twin cliffs, became spread into a broader channel, taking a more tranquil course through the valley. There was no tranquillity there.

Through the cleft of dark-red sandstone a torrent was roaring, its surface white with foam. The strongest horse could not have stemmed it. A hippopotamus would have been swept down like one of its snow-flakes. As easily might a salmon have ascended the cataract of Niagara.

Hamersley saw this at a glance. His heart sank within his bosom, and his body almost fell prostrate to the earth as he slid despairingly from his saddle.

His anguished cry, "Too late!" repeated in louder tone by Walt Wilder, and taken up by the Texans, close pressing behind, was scarcely heard amid the hissing of the stream that surged mockingly by.

CHAPTER XLVII.

A RUSH FOR SHELTER.

When fairly out of the gap, Uruga, directing his ensign to take charge of the troop, rode at some distance ahead, Roblez alongside of him. It was with the object of holding converse without being overheard by their followers.

“What do you think of the Senorita Miranda?” was the lancer-colonel’s first question, as soon as they were out of ear-shot.

Roblez had not seen Miranda’s sister before their rude intrusion of the preceding night.

“Think, colonel? What could one think? She’s certainly the most beautiful captive I ever saw.”

“Not captive. I wish she were. I might make better terms with her. However, when the brother is once out of the way, and that old plotter, Prospero, she will be easier to deal with.”

“And you have determined upon getting rid of him?”

“That’s a silly question to ask for a man who knows me as you, Roblez. Of course, I have determined, and I think you will answer for it that I generally carry out my determinations.”

“He seems not a bad sort of fellow, and he had the name of being an accomplished soldier.”

“You are growing wonderfully merciful, comrade. Is it the tender glances of the senorita that have so softened you?”

“Not likely,” said the lieutenant, laughing; “the eyes that could pierce the heart of Gaspardo Roblez are not to be found in the head of woman. If I have any weakness in the feminine way, it’s for the Goddess Fortuna; and so long as I can get a pack of playing cards, with some rich man to join me in the game, I shall leave petticoats alone.”

Uraga laughed in his turn, for he knew the idiosyncrasy of his old comrade in crime—a strange one for a man who had often committed robbery, and more than once stained his soul with murder..

Cards, dice, and drink were his passion. Of love he was incapable, and yet not given to lust. In his life’s history there had been a chapter of love, and Uraga knew it. It had reached an unfortunate termination, having a good deal to do with his after evil life. And it had steeled his heart against the female sex to something more than contempt—almost to an undying hatred.

Like Byron’s Corsair, Gaspardo Roblez had but one virtue left—courage, which always begets admiration for it in others.

It was this that was leading him to put in a word for Don Valerian Miranda, whose bravery he knew of, for it was well known in the Mexican army.

“He will be tried by the State, and perhaps executed, anyhow,” he said, in continuation of his pleading.

“Not the slightest hope of it,” answered Uruga. “That might have been done when we first turned the party out. Too much time has passed for extreme measures now. Besides, things at the capital are a little bit shaky, and our worthy chief would scarcely dare to sign a sentence of death for a man like Miranda.”

“At all events, he could be put in prison, and kept there.”

“Bah! what are our prisons? Not one of them that hasn’t got a door with a golden key, and any day they may be set upon by a *pronunciamento*. In a jail—especially a New Mexican one—there’s no security for the safe keeping of Miranda.”

“Must he die?”

“Gaspardo Roblez, turn your head round and look in my face!”

“Well, colonel?”

“You see that scar in my cheek?”

“Certainly; it is conspicuous enough.”

“He did not give it, but he was the cause of my receiving it twelve month ago. Ever since it has been the curse and constant agony of my life. I feel it as though it were a fire eternally burning upon my face. It can only be extinguished by the blood of those who kindled it. One of the two has escaped me by a miracle, a mystery. But there is hope yet. The peon says for certain that he has

gone out to the Del Norte ; and if there's a spot in all New Mexico where he can hide himself from my pursuing vengeance, I don't know it. As for Miranda, I am now pretty sure of him ; and I fancy, after seeing that ugly gash on my face, and the glance of my eyes above it, you will not repeat the question, "must he die."

"But how is it to be done without scandal? You know, colonel, it will not answer to murder the man outright. If not held to account by court-martial, it will at least get you into disgrace—myself as well. Had he shown fight, and given us a pretext, it would have been different."

"My dear Gaspardo, don't trouble yourself about pretexts and plans. I have one that will serve all purposes, my own in particular. There will be no scandal—not a whisper or suspicion of it. "What is it?"

This question was addressed to a corporal who, detached from the troop, had ridden up and saluted.

"The ensign sends me to report, colonel, that the Indian peon has somehow or other slipped away."

"What! the man Manuel?"

"The same, colonel."

"Halt!" commanded Uraga, calling to the troop, which instantly came to a stand. "What's this I hear?" he said, riding back to the head and speaking to the ensign.

"Colonel, we miss the fellow who guided us. He must have dropped behind as we rode up out of the valley."

"It doesn't much signify," said Uraga in an undertone,

to his adjutant, Roblez. "We've got all out of him we need care for. Still it can be no harm to have him along. No doubt he's stolen off to settle some affair of his own—some pilferings, I presume—and will be found at the ranch. Corporal, take a file of men, go back into the valley, find this loiterer, and bring him with you. As I intend marching slowly to-day, you'll easily overtake us at the night-camp."

The corporal, singling out the file as directed, rode off, while the troop continued its interrupted march, the colonel and his adjutant again riding far in advance, the former making further disclosure of his plans to his companion in crime. They were atrocious.

Their diabolical dialogue had continued for about an hour, when another lancer, riding up, again interrupted them. He was a grizzled old veteran, who had seen life upon the plains.

"What is it Hernandez?" demanded Uraga.

"Senor colonel," said the man, pointing to a little speck in the sky that had just shown itself above the north-eastern horizon, "do you see that?"

"That spot of cloud? Yes. What of it?"

"There'll come trouble from it. It doesn't look much now, but in ten minutes it'll be over us. It's a norther."

"You think so, Hernandez?"

"I'm sure of it, colonel. I've seen it too often. You may trust me, senores—we're going to have a storm."

“In that case we had better come to a halt, and see what can be done for shelter. I see nothing that would screen a cat but that little clump of stunted trees. Well, better it than nothing; it'll keep the full blast off us; and as I suppose we shall have to make it a halt for the night, we'll get wood from it for our fires. Ride back to the troop, Hernandez. Tell the ensign to follow up to the black-jack grove, and quick. Have the tents ready to be pitched.”

Hernandez did as directed, going at a gallop, while the colonel and his adjutant trotted on to the clump of oaks, that was only three or four hundred yards out of their line of march. It was the same that had given shade and concealment to Frank Hamersley and the hunter on the day before.

Uraga and Roblez saw the track of their mules, and exchanged some words regarding them. But the fast darkening sky drove the subject out of their thoughts, and they occupied themselves in choosing a spot for the pitching of their tents.

Of these there were two—one that the colonel had brought with him from Albuquerque, the other found on the Lone Ranch, an old marquee that the refugees had taken with them in their flight. This had been brought along for the accommodation of the female captives, one of whom Uraga had reasons for treating, if not tenderly, at least with the show of it.

They were soon pitched in the shelter of the black-jacks,

and occupied as ordered by Uraga, while the lancers, hastily dismounting, picketed their horses and made other preparations for the storm predicted by their comrade, Hernandez, as something terrible.

Before long they saw his prediction fulfilled to the spirit and the letter.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE SPLIT TRAIL.

It would be impossible to depict the chagrin of the rangers when they found themselves stayed in the pursuit—perhaps thwarted in a vengeance every man of them keenly felt after hearing the confession of the renegade.

They saw that they were in a trap, helpless to get out of it. Walt Wilder—who during his sojourn in the valley and in his excursions with the botanist, had explored every corner of it—told them so, and the traitor Manuel confirmed it. At one or two places there was a possibility for a man to scale the cliff; but he must be a nimble climber. And if all of them had been this—what good? They could not carry up their horses; and, afoot, what chance for them to overtake a troop of lancers, well mounted and marching in haste, for it was not likely these would make delay in the desert.

How long before the flood would go down and the channel become shallow enough to be passable? This was the question that came next. Hamersley's memory did not serve him to answer it, and Walt could only guess. Again the traitorous peon—not the renegade—was put upon the rack.

“Always twenty-four hours—never less. Sometimes, when the storm was a severe one and much rain fell, two days.”

Much rain *had* fallen ; it was still pouring down. They might count upon the two days.

And during this period of imprisonment, the pursued party would be upon the march ; would get at least three score miles ahead—in short, would reach the settlement before they could be overtaken.

The rangers were furious—mad. Hamersley and the hunter were something more, or worse. Theirs was a madness mingled with the bitterest sorrow. It was an unlucky moment for the corporal of lancers and the two men sent back by Uraga to fall into their hands, which they did. Having reached the valley-bottom just as the storm commenced, they had taken refuge under the trees ; and the rangers, in their hurried ride through the rain, had not perceived them. But they had seen the rangers as these galloped past ; and surprised as well as alarmed by an apparition—strange anywhere, but far more in such a place—they had taken the precaution still further to conceal themselves by going farther in among the trees.

It did not avail them. The disappointed pursuers, on finding their route interrupted by the swollen stream, saw no reason for remaining there ; and leaving one or two of their number to watch the flood and report the first appearance of its subsidence, they started back toward the ranch.

By this time the rain had ceased, and the atmosphere

had become comparatively quiet. This was unfortunate for the skulking lancers, for as the Texan horses returned along the rocky path their shod hoofs rung clear upon the stones, and challenged a neigh from their own animals. It was loud enough to betray them; and in less than ten minutes after, all three were prisoners—taken without resistance.

Almost without trial had they to submit to their fate—a fearful one. Their captors, furious, frenzied, only waited to ascertain their reason for being there. The questions were quick and the responses ready. With a score of rifles pointed at their heads and breasts, there was not much likelihood of hesitation. Nor did they equivocate. They had no time to make up a story, and they told the truth.

Alas! it did not save them. Their examiners and judges were still half insane with rage and disappointment. The time for mercy had gone out of their heads; and in ten minutes after the bodies of the lancers were swinging from the pecan trees—by the neck.

* * * *

Nearly two days passed before the torrent could be stemmed. There was not a minute lost after it was discovered to be fordable; and when at length forded, it tried the strength of the Texan horses and the courage of the men.

Without serious accident they got through the canon and ascended to the upper level. As they rode up between the two hills and caught sight of the open plain, there was

nothing to cheer or pilot them on their way. The storm had obliterated every track left by the lancers, long since departed from the spot. Two days—full two days' start of them; slight chance of their being overtaken. Perhaps they could not even be trailed! If not, they might as well have remained in the valley, or go back to it.

Their course now seemed only guess-work; and it would have been so to any other than prairie men or rangers. For these there were still guides, and they knew it. Not compass or chronometer, but guides to them equally reliable—the sun, the stars, the plants of the desert, and their own knowledge of how to read them. True, these would only give them the direction which the pursued party had taken, and the twice-traitor, Manuel, had already told them of that. It was due west, within a point or two; and westward they went.

For the first ten or fifteen miles there could not be trouble. Hamersley and Walt knew the route by which the troop had approached the portals of the valley. It was natural to suppose they would return on the same path. No trace could be discovered, either of their coming or going. Anyhow, there would not be much on the hard, sun-baked surface of the Staked Plain; but such as had been were now gone, obliterated by the dust and rain.

It mattered not for a time. The grove of stunted oaks came in sight—a landmark so far reliable. Headed by Walt and Hamersley, the rangers made direct for it. It was a ride of over ten miles, and would be a suitable

place for a short stoppage—long enough for the smoking of a pipe, and to swallow a morsel of their cooked deer-meat by those who were hungry.

On arriving at the spot their uncertainty was at an end. Fires, long since cold, the remains of food scattered over the ground, scraps which the ants had not yet eaten up, and other odds and ends, told them the lancer troop had staid there during the storm.

Thenceforward the trail was a clear one—all the more from the damp surface softened by the rain. Beyond, they followed it with no more difficulty than if they had been riding along a turnpike road.

It led them to the Pecos—the point now well known from having been forded by more than one of the reconnoitering parties sent out by the government of the United States. Then it had only been crossed by Mexicans and Indians. It was the crossing-place of the old Spanish military-road between Santa Fe and San Antonio, Texas—the same whose far-spread finger-posts gave to the sterile tract adjoining the name by which it is now known.

The Texans waded their horses across the stream, and spurred out upon the western bank. Up to this point it was all plain sailing, and they had not needed to delay a moment in taking up the trail. They were cheered by finding it fresher as they advanced, for they were traveling at a more rapid rate than the troop of lancers. These had not gone so very slow, for their leader had a motive for making time. But not one so pressing as that which

agitated the breasts of the pursuers. On the western bank of the Pecos these were brought to a stand, and for some time kept in a state of perplexity. The *sign* was no longer so legible. On the contrary, it was obscure, and taxed the oldest and most experienced trackers to read it. The trail forked, becoming two instead of one. The troop had here divided, one portion of it continuing on to the west, the other striking in a north-westerly direction up the bank of the stream. That tending westward showed a majority of tracks. The foot-prints on the up-river trail were few—not over a dozen.

What could have been the cause of the separation?

No one could tell—not even the brown-skinned traitor, with a pistol once more held to his head.

The separation of the troop, however, was not the important question. It was of far more significance to know with which division had gone its chief and the captives.

Like two old beagles on a lost scent when the young dogs have been thrown off, Cully and Walt Wilder were examining the ground some distance ahead. Soon the latter gave tongue.

“Hyar, Frank! hyar’s the track o’ yur ole Kaintuck, an’ we know he war rid by the skunk o’ a kunnel. An’ hyar’s the yeller mustang as carried yur gurl—the say-norata. I ked swar to it ’mong a thousand. Them as we wants goed this way, sartin sure.”

The captain, Cully, and others of prominent position in

the band of Texas Rangers, bent over the sign to which Walt had drawn their attention.

They gave it but slight examination, for they could trust to their old comrade, and knew he had read it correctly. It would have pleased them better if the lancer troop had kept together.

Then they might have had a fight, a grander conflict, and more glory in the conquest. To pursue the smaller party was like chasing a rabbit, instead of a panther or bear. It would be but a poor satisfaction to strike down a half-score of hated foemen instead of fifty.

They even talked of themselves separating into two parties and following up the forked trail. But the prudent Captain Haynes would not hear of it; and backed by the pleading of the young Kentuckian, still more by an appeal from their old associate, Wilder, they became once more of one mind, and all found their faces in the same direction, north-west along the bank of the Pecos.

CHAPTER XLIX.

A SYLVAN SCENE.

On the banks of a small stream, having its source in the Sierra Blanca, and running eastwardly toward the Pecos, two tents are standing. One of them is an ordinary single-pole soldier's tent, the other an oval-shaped marquee.

Inside the latter are two feminine forms—a lady and one who appears to be her waiting-maid. The other is occupied by two officers in the uniform of Mexican Lancers, very similar to that worn by the French. Some half-score lancers are loitering near, one of them standing beside two men who lie prostrate under a tree, their feet fast bound and hands tied behind their backs, proclaiming them to be prisoners.

The reader will recognize the party as that of Colonel Gil Uruga and his captives, his troop diminished to ten men, the rest having separated from him on the Pecos River, at a point fifty miles below, and, by his command, gone direct on to the Del Norte. He is on a route leading north-westward to Santa Fe, the capital of the State, whither he intends taking his prisoners, in order that they shall be tried by the chief military court of the department. This, at least, was the story told to his subaltern officer, when ordering him to take the troop west to Albuquerque.

The tents are not pitched near any road. The old San Antonio trail passes about two miles below ; never used by white men since Texas became independent, and only traversed by Indians—Apaches and Comanches.

Uraga was upon it after crossing the Pecos, but he has left it for the valley of the stream, where we now find him encamped.

Had sylvan beauty influenced him in selecting the site of his encampment, he could not in all the wide West have found a more perfect spot. A soft landscape, dotted with groves of the lovely *alamo* trees, that reflected their verdure in the stream, silently stealing beneath their shadows, here and there flashing into the open light, and like a thread of silver extending across glades green with the beautiful gramma-grass. A landscape, not all woodland and mead, but with a mountain aspect as well, for the scarred sandstone cliffs that bounded the valley bottom rose high into the heavens, and less than a quarter of a mile apart, appeared like grim, giant warriors ready to begin battle, while the tall stems of the cactus projecting above represented their spears.

It was a scene at once soft and sublime, a garden of Paradise, fenced in by a high parapet wall of roughest rock-work, below sweetly smiling, above darkly frowning, and weirdly picturesque.

A wilderness scene as well, with all its charms, uninhabited, no house in sight, no domestic hearth or chim-

ney near, no smoke save that curling up from the fire, late kindled in the lancer's camp.

Beasts and birds its only denizens; its meadow-like openings the range of the antelope and the black-tailed deer; its shaggy bluffs the abode of the grizzly bear; its groves musical with birds of bright plumage, while soaring above or perched on prominent points of the cliff, the buzzard and the white-headed eagle. |

In one of the pleasantest and most picturesque spots of this river valley Uraga had pitched his tents, an open tract of about six acres in extent, and nearly circular in shape, lying within the embrace of an umbrageous wood, the trees being cotton-wood of the largest dimensions; through its midst the streamlet meandered, above issuing from the wood and below becoming lost in it.

On one side the cliffs could be seen rising darkly above the tree-tops, and in the concavity of the opening on this side the tents had been erected, close in to the woodedge, though a considerable distance apart from each other.

The horses, tied upon their trail-ropes, were browsing upon the bank of the stream, and above, upon a projecting promontory of the bluff, a flock of buzzards were sunning themselves with outspread wings, now and then uttering an ominous croak, as they craned their necks outward and looked down upon the encampment below.

It was with no eye to scenic beauty that Uraga had chosen this spot for a camping-place. On the contrary, for a purpose so atrocious that no one could give credit to

it—that is, no one unacquainted with the frontier military life of Northern Mexico as it has been in days past—in the days of the Dictator, Santa Anna, and his New Mexican imitator, Armigo.

This purpose could be gleaned from a conversation between Uraga and his adjutant, inside their tent, some hours after it had been pitched.

But, before marring the fair scene we have painted, by the dark scheme then and there disclosed, let us seek gentler society in the marquee set apart for Adela Miranda and her maid.

It is scarcely necessary to say that a change was observable in the senorita. Her dress, stained with travel, exhibiting souvenirs of the dust-storm and the rain; her hair escaped from its coil, hanging half-disheveled; her cheeks showing the lily, where a rose had habitually bloomed. More than disheveled, she was sad, drooping, despondent.

The maid seemed to have suffered less from her captivity; but this might be from having less to afflict her—no dread of a terrible sacrifice, such as sat like an incubus upon the spirits of her mistress. Conchita had become the comforter.

“Don’t grieve so, senorita,” she said; “I’m sure it will all be right yet. Something whispers to me it will. I heard one of the soldiers say they were taking us to Santa Fe, and that Don Valerian is to be tried by a court-martial, I think he called it. Well, what of it? You know he hasn’t

done anything for which they could condemn him to death, unless they downright murder him, and they dare not do that, tyrants as they are."

At the words "murder him" the senorita started. It was this thought that was making her so sad.

Too well she knew the man into whose hands her brother had again fallen. She remembered the event before, so near succeeding, and only frustrated by that hurried flight which had made them homeless. Was it likely the fiend would be contented to take her brother back now, and trust to the decision of a legal tribunal, civil or military? She could not believe it, and shuddered as she reflected upon it.

"Besides," continued Conchita, pursuing her consolatory strain, "Don Francisco and my brave Walter have gone before us. They will be in New Mexico when we get there, and will be sure to hear of our arrival. Don't you think, senorita, they can do something for Don Valerian?"

"No, no!" despondingly answered Adela; "not for my brother. That is beyond their power, even if poor Valerian should ever reach Santa Fe. I fear he never will—perhaps none of us."

"The saints preserve us! What do you mean, senorita? Surely these men would not murder us?"

"They are capable of doing that, or anything else. Ah! Conchita, you cannot know all. I am in as much danger as my brother, for I shall choose death sooner than——"

She hesitated to speak the word.

“Oh, senorita, if you have to die, so will I! Dear mistress, I am ready to die with you!”

Adela, deeply affected by this proffer of devotion, flung her white arms around the neck of the brown-skinned maiden, and imprinted upon her brow a kiss of heartfelt gratitude.

The tender scene was cut short by the incoming of Uraga; or, rather, by the appearance of his hated face, protruding into the entrance of the tent.

“Is there anything I can do for the senorita?” he asked, speaking in a tone of mock humility; “anything she could eat or drink, which our poor camp fare may provide for her?”

“No, senor,” was the quick response, somewhat defiantly spoken. “I am neither hungry nor thirsty. If you have food or drink to spare, you will do me a greater gratification by giving them to your prisoners. I think they stand more in need of them.”

“In that the senorita is mistaken. My prisoners—I am sorry that duty requires me to call them so—have been amply served all along the route of our somewhat rough journey. Though compelled to carry them in bonds, that may not be agreeable to them, I shall take care, senorita, that no act of inhumanity be shown them. Our journey will soon be at an end, and then it is hoped they will have a better time of it.”

As the ruffian said this, a grin truly diabolical sat upon his features. It was as well that she to whom the speech

was addressed did not perceive it, else she might have drawn from it suspicions of dread significance. With her long, dark lashes down during the whole conversation, she seemed to decline looking upon the face of the man she so thoroughly detested.

Seeing there was nothing to be gained by further false proffers of gallantry, he withdrew, and strode back to the tent, as he passed the interval between biting his lips with chagrin, and muttering threats that were soon after communicated to the ears of the adjutant—companion of his crimes and part sharer in his plunderings.

CHAPTER L.

A FIENDISH SCHEME.

To understand the exact situation in which Urago stood to his captives, some words of explanation may be necessary.

The reader already knows of his hatred for Don Valerian Miranda, and his love—if such love as his deserves the name—for Don Valerian's sister. It was, at all events, a passion deep and absorbing, and perhaps would of itself have led to the dark deeds already committed by him and the atrocious schemes he had conceived.

But in addition to his love—low as it was—another and still lower passion was inspiring him—cupidity. The large estate held by Colonel Miranda previous to the revolution that had made him a refugee, was not yet confiscated. The new authorities hesitated to do this on account of the danger of a measure so high-handed. It required a certain judicial formality, leading to long delay; for even in Mexico each new dictator has to deal delicately at first, until he feels himself fairly established in despotic sway.

And even if the hacienda of the patriot colonel should be ultimately condemned to confiscation, only one-half of it would be forfeited to the State. The other mostly was

the property of his sister, left to her by will, and this could not be legally touched. Adela Miranda would be rich, even if her brother was reduced to pauperism or condemned to death. Uraga knew all this, and in addition to his other desire, it formed a powerful incentive to his wishing her for a wife. Although he was living in the house where she and her brother had been born, and from which he had been himself so instrumental in expelling them, he was there only as a lodger. He wanted to be the owner, not only of the mansion itself, but of the broad acres that surrounded it—on every side stretching for leagues. This had been, and still was, the ambition of his life. He had still but a dim idea of how it was to be realized. Notwithstanding a good deal of low cunning, his brain was but that of a brute—too dull to see beyond the act of the hour. His reasoning extended no further, else would he have understood that the course he had resolved upon pursuing could not possibly accomplish his purpose, unless backed by still further acts of atrocity and violence. He believed that if Miranda were once out of the way, he would be able to overcome the obstacles that separated him from the sister; that left unprotected, she would yield to his solicitations, he himself approaching her in the full plenitude of power which he now enjoyed.

This had been his scheme when he intended to have the patriot colonel taken surreptitiously from the prison and dispatched among the defiles of the mountains. He would himself have taken the life of Valerian Miranda—

assassinated him without thought of remorse—could he have been certain of doing it undiscovered or without danger. No opportunity had as yet offered, even while making him a prisoner for the second time. Lawless as were the deeds of the Mexican soldiery, there was still some shame left—or at least a trace of responsibility. But for this, Miranda would not now have been lying bound under the shade of a cotton-wood tree. He would have been sleeping in the cold grave.

He might still have been supposed near it by any one who could have overheard the conversation that occurred between Uraga and his adjutant, as the former came angrily into his tent.

“How long are we to remain here?” was the question asked by Roblez.

“That is an interrogatory not so easily answered. It depends——”

“On what, *senor colonel*?”

“Oh, on many things—events, incidents, and circumstances. You would like to know them, comrade?”

“I am all anxiety, colonel.”

“Very well, adjutant, you shall. But you must give me leave first to take a drink of wine, and then to light a cigar. The interview I’ve had with the *senorita*, short as it was, has made me thirsty, and will require a little tobacco-smoke to neutralize the intoxicating perfume of her presence, still clinging around me.”

After this clumsy attempt at a jest, Uraga poured out

some liquor from his canteen-flask, drank it off, and then, lighting his cigarette, proceeded with the promised explanation.

“I spoke of events, incidents, and circumstances, didn’t I, Roblez?”

“You did, colonel.”

“Well, suppose I clump them all together, and give you the story in a simple narrative—a monologue? I know, friend Roblez, you’re not a man much given to speech, so that will save you the necessity of opening your mouth till I’ve got through.”

Roblez, who was rather a silent sort of scoundrel, nodded assent to this proposition.

“I’ve already told you plain enough,” continued Uraga, “that I have no intention of taking Valerian Miranda or the old quack of a doctor to the Del Norte. I don’t care a fig about the life of the latter, but it is expedient he should die to save exposure. He knows too much of past events, as you yourself are aware. Both must die. Of course I don’t intend killing them myself; nor yet can it be done by my men, though the cut-throats would be ready enough if I but gave them the hint. That, too, might lead to scandal, and bring disgrace. To avoid both, I’ve engaged an executioner, who will do the job without taking direct orders from me.”

“Who?” asked Roblez, forgetting his promise to be silent.

“Don’t interrupt, and I shall tell you the whole story.”

It will interest you ; and when you have heard it, I venture to say you will give me credit for strategy, as you have done before now."

The subordinate simply nodded in the affirmative.

"Of course," Uraga continued, in a tone of serio-comicality, "you have heard of a copper-colored gentleman called the Horned Lizard. If I mistake not, you have the honor of his acquaintance ; and if I mistake not still further, you will see him here during the course of the evening, or at all events, at an early hour to-morrow morning. He will make his appearance in a somewhat eccentric fashion. No doubt he will come up to the camp at a charging gallop, some fifty or a hundred of his painted warriors along with him ; and I shouldn't wonder if they should spit our poor lancers on the points of their spears. That will depend on whether our valiant followers are foolish enough to make resistance. I don't think they will ; and more likely we shall see them gallop off, or go skulking into these cotton-woods, at the first whoop of the savage assailants. You and I, Roblez, will have to do the same ; but, as gallant gentlemen, we can't do less than take the ladies with us. To leave them to the mercy of the savages without making an effort to save them, would be accounted absolute poltroonery. It would never do to be told in the settlements, therefore we must do our best to take them along. Of course we cannot be blamed for not being able to save our prisoners ; and their fate, I very much fear, will be to have half a dozen Comanche spears

thrust through their bodies. It's sad to think of it; but these things cannot always be avoided. They are but the ordinary incidents of life on this disturbed frontier. Now, adjutant, I suppose you understand me?"

"Since I am at length permitted to speak, I would say that I do—at least I have an obscure comprehension of it. Your story, colonel, freely translated, means this: You have arranged with the Horned Lizard to make a counterfeit attack upon our camp; to shoot down or spear our half-score poor devils of lancers, if need be——"

"There won't be any need. They'll run like good fellows at the first yell of the Indians. Don't be uneasy about them."

"In any case, the Horned Lizard is to kill our two prisoners, and so take the scandal of their assassination off your hands. If I understand aught, that is the programme."

"It is."

CHAPTER LI.

AWAITING THE ASSASSINS.

In order to carry through his diabolical scheme with the most perfect convenience, and without risk of miscarriage, Uraga had taken certain precautions in the selection of his camp, as also in its arrangement. The prisoners were kept apart, and at a good distance from the tent appropriated to the women, while the other tent was between.

The horses of the troopers were picketed at some distance off on the meadow, while those of Uraga and Roblez, along with Lolita and the mule that gave transport to Conchita, were tied to the trees, a little to the rear of the marquee tent. All were under the saddle, with slip-halters on, the bits taken off to enable them to browse.

Some three hundred yards down the stream, a single lancer had been posted to act as a picket-guard. His orders were at once to gallop in and give warning should any one be seen coming up the valley. There was no sentry stationed on the opposite side. Uraga did not deem it necessary. He had said nothing to the soldiers as to how long they were to be halted, only to keep their horses under the saddle, and themselves in readiness at any mo-

ment to bridle and mount them. He knew not himself how soon this order would be issued.

His design was, the moment the picket sent came in to report the approach of the savages, to create by his own action and that of his adjutant a stampede of their little party, and as the Indian yells would be heard shortly after, there would be just time for the lancers to rush to their horses and ride off. In their hasty retreat they would not trouble themselves about the brace of bound prisoners lying under the trees. He knew his poltroon cut-throats well enough for that. For himself and Roblez it would be gallantry enough to save the women, by carrying them both to their saddles and taking them along in the flight. The Indian damsel they did not care for, and perhaps would have left her to care for herself. But, as their escape would be easy, and the savages would not pursue them very hotly or very far, Conchita would be but a slight incumbrance.

It was certainly an original way to get rid of an enemy, without being called to account for his assassination—a conception cunning as atrocious. But in the social history of Mexico such chapters are not so uncommon.

Meanwhile, the two prisoners, lying side by side, could communicate with each other, though not without every word being heard by the sentry who stood over them. Had not both received a classic education, no secret could have passed between them. This, however, enabled them to talk without being understood—in Latin. It was prob-

ably the first time Miranda had ever found the dead language of any service to him, though Don Prospero may have before obtained advantage from it in his philosophical studies.

No ancient Roman ever used it to give expression to gloomier thoughts, for in the minds of both were the most fearful forebodings. Too well they remembered the plot, overheard by Don Prospero, when Miranda lay wounded within the prison cell. It was but natural they should be apprehensive of a similar cruel intention. They knew that their fiendish captor was capable of the darkest deeds in the calendar of crime.

It seemed strange his having divided his troop, sending the larger portion of it on to Albuquerque. They had heard from their guards that they were being carried to Santa Fe, there to be tried. It would have been pleasant for them to believe this. They could not. There was mystery, too, in Uraga's movements about the camp; they could see him now and then as he passed out of his tent, and hear him in muttered conversation with his fellow-ruffian, Roblez. Once, as he was seen to enter and stay sometime within the marquee, Miranda's heart was torn with wild thoughts—fears for the safety of his sister.

He was not allowed to hold communication with her, nor she with him. This had been interdicted all along the route, since leaving the Lone Ranch. Even messages were prohibited from passing between them. Every-

thing relating to one another was doubt in the minds of both—a very anguish of suspense.

From the glimpse now and then got of him the prisoners could see that there was something unusual in the demeanor of Uraga. He moved uneasily into and out of his tent, and once passed out from the camp in the direction of where the picket had been placed. He was absent for a considerable interval. As he came back his countenance expressed disappointment, as if he had been expecting some one who had not come to time.

After awhile he again went forth, going down the valley as before, and also as before afoot. This time he went some distance beyond the point where the lancer had been ordered to stand guard. Some two hundred paces below, a spur of the cliff sloped down to the bank of the stream, there ending on an elevated bluff, the top of which was easily attained. Climbing up it, he bent his gaze eastward down the stream, where the timber, growing only in scattered clumps, gave him a view of the grass-covered plain spreading between.

A man upon it could be seen more than a mile off; and shortly after one was seen at about this distance coming up the valley. He was mounted on a mule that appeared jaded by a long journey, from the way in which he was urging it forward.

Evidently the rider was in more haste than the animal, his arms and legs being all four in motion, while the mule seemed with difficulty to drag one limb after the other.

"That must be one of my messengers," muttered Uraga, as the mule-rider first came in sight. "It is," he continued, as the man drew near enough to be recognized; "it's Jose. He appears to be alone. He is! What can be the reason? Where's Pedrillo? What can it mean, I wonder?"

He was kept wondering until Jose rode up near the spot, and seeing his master, dismounted and approached him.

In the messenger's countenance there was the look of disappointment, and something more. There was a tale of woe, and the fear to tell it.

"Where's Pedrillo?" was the first question, put in a tone of impatience.

"Oh, colonel," said Jose, hat in hand and trembling in every joint, "Pedrillo—poor Pedrillo!"

"Well, poor Pedrillo—what has happened to him?"

"Your excellency, I fear to tell you!"

"Tell it, sirrah! And at once, or I'll send a bullet through your stupid skull! Out with it, whatever it is!"

"Alas! poor Pedrillo! He's drowned in the Pecos!"

"Drowned? Pedrillo drowned?"

"Ah! it is true, senor colonel! Poor fellow!"

"How did this happen, Jose?"

"We were crossing the ford. The waters were swelled from a norther there had been out on the plains. The river was deep, and raged like a torrent. Pedrillo's mule stumbled, and was swept off. It was as much as mine

could do to keep her feet. I think Pedrillo must have got his feet entangled in the trappings, for I could see him struggling alongside, and clinging to the mule, till both went under. When they came to the surface again, they were drowned dead, and floated on without making a motion, except what the flood gave them, as their bodies were tossed about on the water. As I could do nothing, colonel, I hastened on to tell you what had happened. Poor Pedrillo!"

A cloud darkened the brow of Uraga, though it had little to do with the death of Pedrillo, or compassion for his fate. This he scarcely thought of. His trouble was, as to whether there had been a miscarriage in the message of which the drowned man had been more especially the bearer.

His next interrogatory, quickly put, was to be satisfied on this head.

"You reached the Comanche town?"

"We did. Pedrillo had a message for the chief, the Horned Lizard, and a letter for Sanchez. You know that, I suppose. Pedrillo told me so."

"Well, you saw him deliver the letter to Sanchez?"

"We did not deliver it to Sanchez."

"To the Horned Lizard, then?"

"To neither, your excellency. We could not."

"Could not? What do you mean, sirrah?"

"They were not there to receive it. They are no longer in this world, neither the Horned Lizard nor Sanchez."

Oh, colonel, the Tenawas have met with a great misfortune. They have had a fight with a party of Texans. The chief is killed, Sanchez is killed, and nearly half of all the warriors. We found the tribe in mourning, the women all painted black, and their hair cut off, the men that escaped from the fight cowed and hiding in their lodges."

A fierce exclamtion escaped from the lips of Uraga as he received this disclosure, while the cloud gathered darker on his brow.

"But Pedrillo," he inquired, after a pause, "what did he say to them? He had a message, you know? Did he make it known to the warriors?"

"He did, your excellency. They could not read the letter; but he told them what it was about. They were to meet you here, he said. But they would not come—they were in too great distress at the death of their chief, and the terrible defeat they had received. They were in fear that the Texans would come on to their town, and were making preparations to leave when Pedrillo and myself came away. Poor Pedrillo!"

As Uraga walked back to the camp, followed by the bearer of bad tidings, who led his tired mule tremblingly after, the cloud upon his brow seemed blacker than ever.

CHAPTER LII.

A SINGULAR DISPATCH.

The rangers trailing the detached and smaller party of lancers up the bank of the Pecos, were making all the haste in their power, Hamersley and Walt Wilder every now and then saying a word to urge them on.

In pursuit of such an enemy, the Texans needed no pressure. It was only the irrestrainable impatience of the two men, whose souls were tortured by the apprehension of some dark danger hovering over the heads of those dear to them.

They found no difficulty in following the trail of the troopers and their captives. The soldiers' horses were shod, and the late storm, sweeping over the plain and washing it with its torrent of rain, had obliterated all old tracks, leaving a clear surface, on which the new hoof-prints were not only distinct, but conspicuous—so much so, indeed, that the craft of Cully, Walt, and other skilled trackers, was not called into requisition, the rangers riding along the trail as fast as their animals could carry them.

It was evident that the pursued party had taken no pains to blind or conceal it. Why should they? Uruga could have no thought or suspicion of being followed—

certainly not of being pursued, and still less of being pursued by pursuers. He had thought it a little strange that the two lancers sent back after the peon had not sooner overtaken him. But there was nothing in this to cause suspicion or alarm. They might have been detained in the search for the skulker, or by some other trifling accident. Perhaps the storm had delayed them in the valley. This was the likeliest solution, as he remembered Manuel having said something about the occasional stoppage caused by floods in his minute description of the topography of the valley. In all likelihood this was what hindered the corporal and his file from sooner rejoining their comrades. But they would easily get upon the track of the troop, and would be sure to follow the larger party on to Albuquerque.

Had the lancer colonel while making these reflections but known the true state of the case—that his trio of troopers, instead of proceeding to Albuquerque, were at that moment suspended by their necks to the branches of a pecan tree—he would have been more cautious about the path on which he was himself proceeding, and taken some pains to avoid leaving a plain trail behind him.

Along it the rangers rode rapidly, gratified to observe that it grew fresher and fresher as they advanced, for they were traveling twice as fast as they who had made it.

All at once they were summoned to a stop by the sight of what never fails to bring the most hurried travelers to a halt—the dead body of a man. It was lying on a sand-

and out into the river—the Pecos—where it had been washed by the waters, now subsiding freshet due to the late tornado. Near by was the carcass of a mule, deposited in a similar manner. Both were conspicuous enough when the rangers came abreast of the spot, but their attention had been drawn to them long before by a flock of buzzards, some hovering above and some alighting near the corpse of the man and the carcass of the mule.

Half a dozen of the rangers, heading their horses down the sloping bank, rode out upon the sandspit to give examination to the “sign”—so sad, yet so terribly attractive. It would tempt scrutiny anywhere, but in the prairie wilderness, on the dangerous desert, it might be the medium of guiding to a path of safety, or warning off from one that was perilous.

While the half-dozen who had detached themselves proceeded out upon the sand-bar, the main body of the rangers, remaining up on the high bank, awaited their return.

Walt Wilder was among those who had gone out to examine the corpse and carcass. The former was that of an Indian, but not of the savage tribes. His attire proclaimed him a Christianized aboriginal—one of those whom the Catholic *padres*, in their missionary zeal, have succeeded in winning from their wild, wicked ways.

There were no marks of violence on the body of the man, nor on the mule. The case was clear at a glance.

It was one of drowning; and the swollen stream, still foaming past, was evidence eloquent of how it happened.

On the man's body there were found no signs of rifling or robbery. His pockets, now turned inside out, yielded such contents as might be expected on the person of an Indian servant

Only one thing that in the eyes of the examiners appeared out of place—a piece of paper, folded in the form of a letter and sealed with wax. It was saturated with water, and stained to the hue of the still turbulent stream. But the superscription could be read :

“FOR SANCHEZ.”

So much Cully and Walt could make out for themselves. On breaking open the seal and endeavoring to decipher what was written inside, they were at fault. They could not understand a word of it, for it was written in a language that was a sealed book to them. It was in Spanish.

Without staying any longer to attempt translating it, Walt Wilder hastened back to the river-bank, bringing the letter with him.

On regaining the rangers, he handed it to Hamersley, who first read and then translated it aloud. It ran as follows :

“DEAR SANCHEZ :—As soon as you receive this, communicate its contents to the chief. Tell him I want him to meet me at the Alamo Creek—same place as before—and that he is to bring with him twenty or thirty of his painted devils; the lesser number will be enough, as it isn't an affair of fight or danger. Come yourself with

them. You will find me encamped with a small party, some women, and two male prisoners. No matter about the women. It's the men you have to deal with, and this is what you are to do :

“Charge upon the camp the moment you get sight of it. Make the redskins shout like fiends, and ride right up, brandishing their spears. You won't meet any resistance, nor find any one on the ground when you've got there—only our two prisoners, who will be fast bound, and cannot escape with us. What is to be done with them is the important part—in fact, the whole play, dear Sanchez. Tell the chief they are to be killed upon the spot—thrust through with your spears as soon as you get up. See to this yourself, lest there be any mischance, and I'll take care you have your reward.”

On hearing the contents of this vile epistle, the rage of the rangers, already sufficiently aroused, became almost boundless, and for awhile sought vent in the most fearful threats and asseverations.

Though there was no name appended to this diabolical chapter of instructions, they could have no doubt as to who had been the writer. Circumstances, present and antecedent, pointed to the Mexican, Colonel Uraga—he of whom they were in pursuit.

But who was Sanchez, the man to whom the letter was addressed, his name still legible on the outside?

A wild cry went up, almost simultaneously, from the whole troop, as they turned their faces toward the renegade, who, as a prisoner, was still with them.

The wretch turned pale, as if the blood had been abruptly drawn out of his veins. Without comprehending the exact import of that cry, he could read in forty pairs

of eyes, glaring angrily upon him, that his last hour had come.

They had no doubt now as to whom the letter had been addressed, and they could tell why it had miscarried. Indeed the renegade had already declared his name, not thinking it would thus turn up to condemn him—to doom him; for although he had been promised life, with the punishment of a prison, these conditions related to another criminality, and were granted without the full knowledge of his guilt—his connivance in crimes of unparalleled atrocity.

His late judges felt themselves absolved from every stipulation of pardon or mercy; and summoning to the judgment seat the quicker and still more stern decreer, *Lynch*, in less than five minutes after the renegade was launched into eternity.

There was reason for their haste. They knew that the letter had miscarried; but he who could have dictated such a damnable epistle was a tiger let loose who could not be too soon destroyed.

CHAPTER LIII.

A NEW DETERMINATION.

For the disaster that had occurred to the Tenawa Comanches, Colonel Gil Uraga did not care a fig, only so far as that by the death of the Horned Lizard he had lost an ally who might have been of service on some future occasion of robbery or retaliation. The same sort of sorrow he felt for his confederate Sanchez, though to a less degree, since the renegade had less power to assist him in his nefarious deeds.

After all, it mattered not now so much. In his capacity of military chief of a district he had obtained a point of power—ill-gotten and arbitrary—that had rendered him to some extent independent of any secret or left-handed assistance.

His greatest chagrin on getting the report of Jose was that the Indian disaster had thwarted his present well-conceived plan of assassination, and, as he walked back toward camp, he was busy with his black thoughts—in search of some new scheme to effect this determined purpose.

He could have murdered the two prisoners with his own hand, and without compunction he would have done

so on the spot, and at that moment, but for the fear of tell-tale tongues, and the consequences that might accrue. Open assassination would certainly compromise him; how was he to avoid this danger by giving a color to the deed?

Perhaps his fellow-ruffian, Roblez, could suggest some way of getting over the difficulty, and on reaching the camp-ground he motioned the latter to follow him into his tent.

"It's all over, Roblez. The luck appears to be against us."

"I see one of your messengers has returned, colonel; how about the other?"

"Pedrillo—poor devil! He will never return here or elsewhere. From what Jose has told me, he's now on a voyage down the Pecos, along with the mule."

"I do not comprehend you, colonel."

"Pedrillo is defunct. His animal stumbled with him while crossing the Pecos. There's high water just now, and the flood swept both down stream, drowned dead. That's the fate of Jose, but not the worst part of it."

"What is there worse?"

"Our friend, the Horned Lizard, is also defunct—gone to his happy hunting-grounds, with about half his band of beauties. And they have taken Sanchez along with them."

"You astonish me! How has that happened!"

"The Texans. They've had a fight with a party of these out on the plains, and got the worst of it. A bloody

encounter, that has thinned the tribe considerably—one-half, they told my messenger, who found them in mourning and loud lamentations.”

“Then they are not coming here?”

“Of course not. That’s the worst of it. This bit of crooked work spoils all my plans; and we are left to our own resources.”

“What do you intend doing now?”

“I intend nothing as yet. This unexpected affair has frustrated all my plans, and leaves me without one. Can you think of any?”

The adjutant remained silent for a moment, as if reflecting. He at length said, somewhat hastily:

“Are you still determined on——”

“On what?”

“The death of the prisoners?”

Uraga responded by pointing to the scar on his cheek, and then, with a still more diabolical expression of countenance, nodding toward the tent that contained the women.

Roblez understood the pantomime.

“Now, more than ever, am I determined on it,” said the implacable fiend; “now that the other has escaped me. Though there is a chance to get hold of him yet. If he make but ten days’ stay on the boundary of New Mexico, ’tis all I shall ask. And that reminds me, we’ve not much time to waste here. I must make sure of Miranda while he’s in my power, and without much fur-

ther delay. Come, adjutant, quicken your thoughts, and help me to a plan !”

Roblez, with a cigar between his teeth, again spent some time in seeming reflection. Whether it was that a spark of humanity yet lingered in his heart, or that he did not see the necessity of such a sacrifice, or that he apprehended from it some future danger to himself—which of these, or whatever was the motive in his mind, he was evidently inclined to give counsel against the killing of the prisoners.

“Uraga,” he said, at length, addressing his superior officer in a strain of friendly familiarity, “I wish to speak plain with you. It is for your sake, and I hope you won’t be offended. Do you give me permission to ask you a question?”

“Ask it,” gruffly conceded the colonel.

“You want the *senorita* for your wife?”

The question drew from the colonel an exclamation, accompanied by a fierce grimace. But no verbal answer. He only nodded assent.

“In that case, my friend,” said the adjutant, continuing the tone of familiarity, “it appears to me that the best way to accomplish your end would be to offer Miranda his life.”

“How?”

“Let him know that he is going to die, and shortly, or let him think it, which will serve all the same, that you and I have condemned him by court-martial, which in one

sense we have the power to do. Offer him his life in return for his consenting to your marriage with his sister. If he refuse, then try the effect of the same offer upon her. That's what *I* would do if I were in the same dilemma."

"Bah! What would all that lead to? Supposing that by such means I obtain the consent of both, do you think they would adhere to it, even upon oath? Once back to the Del Norte, with the world to witness such a deed, they would easily withdraw from it. You forget the old adage, adjutant: 'One man may take a horse to the water, but twenty can't make him drink.'"

"In this case, colonel, it doesn't apply, for you needn't take your horse to the water—at least, not so far as the Del Norte. You forget that in the village of Anton Chico, through which we have to pass, there's a clergyman, who, for a couple of doubloons, will consummate the marriage, and without asking a question. You understand better now, colonel?"

Uraga reflected. Roblez had put the thing in a new light. After all, what harm in letting Miranda live? It would be enough satisfaction to his vengeful spite if he could compel the betrothal of his sister, soon to be followed by the bridal.

"Should he refuse—should both refuse—what then?"

"You will be in no worse position than you are now, colonel. Then you can carry out your idea of the court-

martial. But there can be no harm in trying the other plan first."

"I shall try it," said Uraga, springing up from his camp-stool, and turning toward the entrance of the tent. "You are right, Roblez. It is a second string to the bow, and may be a better one. I shall try your plan at once. If it fail, before to-morrow's sun shows over the cliffs the proud beauty will find herself brotherless!"

Saying this, he strode out of the tent with an air that told of a determination to exact the dread promise, or in lieu of it decree the death of Don Valerian Miranda.

CHAPTER LIV.

CONDITIONS OF FREEDOM.

After stepping forth from the tent, Uraga paused to reflect. The plan suggested by Roblez seemed feasible enough. If he could but force the consent as proposed, it would not be difficult to get it sealed before anything could intervene to counteract it. But there were other points to be considered ere proceeding further with the affair. The lancer escort must not know too much. There were ten of them, all thorough cut-throats; and, as such, having a fellow-feeling for their colonel and chief. Not one of them but had committed some crime, and more than one who had stained his soul with murder. This was nothing strange in a regiment of Mexican soldiers—under the *regime* of Santa Anna. It was not rare even among its officers.

On parting with his troop, Uraga had selected his escort with an eye to chances and contingencies. Yet, although they would have been ready to yield obedience to him in any deed of blood, he did not desire them to penetrate the darkness of his motives. If ordered to shoot or hang the two prisoners, they would have obeyed him with the eagerness of blood-hounds let loose from the leash, or wicked

boys permitted to indulge in some cruel sport. There could be no difficulty in having the prisoners executed, under the pretense of a condemnation by court-martial; or without, by a simple command from their chief. Therefore Uraga would not himself need to act directly as the assassin. No poniard or pistol would be required; a volley of carbines would do the deed, if not more effectually, at least more plausibly.

There was the pretext of patriotism, with the punishment of treason to the State. This would be the pretended motive. It was only the real one Uraga cared to conceal from his escort.

They must not overhear what was now planned between the colonel and his adjutant, as a preliminary of what might follow. Nor should they be within sight to suspect it. It was necessary they should be at a distance from the camp-ground. Leaving this was a matter of but slight difficulty to a skilled strategist like Gil Uraga. A plan at once presented itself.

"Sergeant," he called to the trooper with cheveroned sleeves, an immediate authority over the escort, "come hither."

The sergeant soon stood before him, saluting and silently waiting orders.

"That Indian you see," continued his colonel, pointing to Jose, who was but little known to the soldiers, "was on the way with a message to me, in company with another. In crossing the Pecos, his comrade was carried off by the

flood. He may or may not be drowned. In either case, go in search of him, and if you find his body, bring it. Jose will guide you to the place where he was last seen. You will ride down the bank of the river, though you need not go far—two or three miles will be far enough. If you don't find any trace of him within that distance, then the poor fellow must certainly have sunk to the bottom, and it would be no use searching farther. Take all the men with you; only leave Galvez, who is keeping guard over the prisoners."

The lancers were soon in their saddles and riding away from the ground, the prisoners' guard alone staying behind. Galvez, who being a "familiar" with the colonel—more than once his participator in crime—could be trusted to overhear anything.

This movement had not escaped the observation of the two men tied under the tree. They could not divine its meaning, but neither could they auger well of it. Still worse when Uruga, signing to the sentry to come to him apart, muttered some directions in his ear.

It did not tranquillize their fears to know what this was. On the contrary, their apprehensions were increased when the trooper again returned to them, and unloosening the cord that bound the ankles of Don Prospero, raised him upon his feet, as if to remove him from the spot.

On being asked by the prisoners what it was for, Galvez condescended to answer, saying, in a gruff voice, that he had orders to separate them, so that in the absence of the

others his task in guarding them should be easier. It seemed a lame explanation, but no other was given, as Galvez, rudely taking hold of the doctor's arm, conducted him to a distance of two or three hundred yards, and once more laying him along the ground, stood over him in the attitude of a sentry.

All this was mysterious and fear-inspiring, as much to Don Valerian, now left alone, as to Don Prospero, who had been taken apart.

Miranda was not left long to his meditations. In a few seconds after, the place of his friend and fellow-captive was occupied by his captor and enemy. Gil Uraga stood beside him.

There was a quick interchange of glances; on the side of Miranda defiant, on that of Uraga triumphant, although the expression of triumph appeared to be held in check, as if to avert some event before showing itself in more savage demonstration.

It was the first time Uraga had vouchsafed speech to his former commanding officer since making him a prisoner.

"Don Valerian Miranda," he began, "you will, no doubt, be wondering why I have ordered your fellow-prisoner to be taken apart from you. It will be explained by my saying that I have some words for you I don't wish overheard by any one—not even your dearest friend, Don Prospero."

"What words, Gil Uraga?"

"I have a proposal to make to you."

Miranda remained silent, awaiting it.

“I may first tell you,” continued the ruffian, “though doubtless you know it already, that your life is in my power—that if I now put a pistol to your head and blow out your brains, there will be no calling to account. If there were any danger of it, it could be avoided by giving you the benefit of a court-martial. Your life is forfeit; and our military laws, as you are aware, can be stretched a little just now to meet your case.”

“I *am* aware of it,” said Miranda, his patriotic spirit touched by the humiliating reflection. “I know the despotism that now rules can do anything, and would, without care either for law or constitution.”

“Just so,” assented Uruga; “and for this reason I approach you with my proposal.”

“Speak it, then. I am your prisoner, powerless, and therefore cannot help listening. Speak it, senor, without further circumlocution.”

“Since you command me to avoid circumlocution, I will obey you to the letter. My proposal is this: That in exchange for your life, which I have the power to take and also to save, you will give me your sister.”

Miranda writhed within his rawhide fastenings till the cords almost cut through the skin. Withal he was silent, his feelings being too intense to permit of speech.

“Don’t mistake me, Don Valerian Miranda,” pursued his tormentor, in a tone intended to be soothing. “When I ask you to give me your sister, I mean it in an honorable

sense. I wish her for my wife ; and, to save your life, she will consent to become so, if you only use your influence to that end. She would not be a faithful sister if she did not. I need not tell you that I love her—you know that already. Accept the conditions I offer, all will yet be well with you. I can even promise you the pardon of the State, for my influence in high places is very different from what it was when you knew me as your subordinate officer. It will enable me to do that."

Miranda still remained silent—long enough to arouse the impatience of him who dictated, and tempt the threat already designed as an alternative.

"Refuse," he said, his brow suddenly clouding, while a gleam of sinister significance flashed out from his eyes, "and you see not another sun. By that now shining you may take your last look at the earth, for this night will certainly be your last upon it. You see the buzzards on the cliff? They are whetting their beaks as if expecting a banquet. They shall have one, and it will be on your body, if you refuse what I have offered. Accept them, or before to-morrow's sun reaches meridian the vultures will be feeding upon your flesh and the coyotes quarreling over your bones. Answer me, and without faltering of speech. Let it be plain, Don Valerian Miranda—a yes or no."

"No!" was the word shouted, almost shrieked out, by the man thus menaced. "No," he repeated ; "never shall I consent to that. I am in your power, Gil Uruga. Put your pistol to my head and blow out my brains, as you

have hinted ; hang me to one of the branches above ; give me any kind of death—torture, if it please you. It could not be such torture as to see you the husband of my sister. I shall at least be spared that. You cannot force my consent, nor gain hers, upon such disgraceful conditions. My noble Adela ! I know she will rather see me die—die along with me.”

“Ha, ha !” responded Uraga, in a peal of mocking laughter, in which could be detected a trace of chagrin. “We shall see about that. Women are not so superbly stupid ; they have a keener comprehension of their own interests. Surely I mean no harm to the Senorita Adela. On the contrary, it is an honor I am offering her. Perhaps she may not so disdainfully reject it as you have done, Don Valerian. However, we shall soon see.”

Saying this, Uraga turned upon his heel and walked off, leaving the chafed captive writhing within his ropes.

CHAPTER LV.

A SISTER SORELY TRIED.

The marquee that gave shelter to Adela Miranda and her maid was not visible from the spot where the prisoners had been placed. The other tent stood between, and some shrubbery further concealed it. But, from the tenor of his last speech, Miranda guessed that Uraga had gone thither, and could also guess at his intentions.

He was right in both conjectures, for the ruffian, chagrined by the denial he had received from the brother, and impatient of delay, was determined on having an answer from the sister, point-blank and upon the instant.

He entered the lady's tent. Once inside, he muttered a direction, or, rather, request, for Conchita to withdraw. He did this with as much grace as the excited state of his feelings enabled him to command, excusing the act by saying that he wished a word with the senorita alone—one he was sure she would not wish to be heard by other ears than her own.

Roused from her despondent attitude, she looked up, her large, round eyes expressing surprise, anger, apprehension.

The maid, disinclined to obey the request, looked

toward her mistress for a sign of instruction. The latter hesitated to give it. Only for an instant. It could serve no purpose to gainsay the wish of one who had full power to enforce it, and whose demeanor showed him determined on doing so.

“You can go, Conchita,” said the young lady. “I shall call you when you are wanted.”

The girl went out with evident reluctance, and stopped not far from the tent.

“Now, sir,” demanded the senorita, on being left alone with the intruder, “what have you to say to me that I should not wish her to hear?”

“I pray you, senorita, do not begin with me so brusquely. I approach you as a friend, though hitherto I may have approached you only in the character of an enemy. I hope, however, that in time you will give me credit for good intentions. I am sure you will, when you know how much I am distressed by the position I am placed in. It grieves me that my instructions from headquarters compel me to adopt some harsh measures with my prisoners; but in truth, senorita, no discretion has been left me.”

“Senor,” returned the lady, casting upon him a look of scornful incredulity, “you have said all this before. I thought you had something of more importance to communicate to me.”

“And so I have, senorita. But it is of so unpleasant a nature, I hesitate to give speech to it.”

"You need not, sir. After what has passed, I am not likely to be nervous."

"Despite her courageous nature, and an effort to appear calm, her voice trembled as she spoke. There was an expression on the face of the man that boded some evil disclosure.

The suspense, however, was too painful to be endured, and, in a tone still defiant, she made a further demand for the promised communication.

"Senorita," he said, speaking in grave, measured voice, like a doctor delivering a prognosis of death, "it has been my duty to make your brother a prisoner—an unpleasant one, as I have said; but alas! the part already performed is nothing compared with what is now required of me. You say you are prepared for a shock. I am glad of it, senorita, for what I am going to say will cause you one."

She no longer attempted to conceal the look of alarm, now discernable in her large, wondering eyes.

"Say it!" were the words that fell mechanically from her lips, as if forced from her by the intensity of her apprehension.

"You are soon to be without a brother."

"What mean you, Colonel Uraga?"

"Don Valerian dies within the hour!"

"You are jesting, sir! My brother has not been sick. He is not wounded. Why should he die? Oh, senor, do not torture me thus! Unsay your words, or give an explanation of them!"

She spoke hurriedly, and with an incredulous stare at Uraga, while at the same time her hand, pressing upon her bosom, told that she, too, truly believed what he had said.

“Don Valerian is not sick,” continued the unfeeling ruffian, “nor yet has he received any wound. For all this, in less than an hour he must die. It has been decreed.”

“Oh, merciful Virgin! You are mocking me, senor. His death decreed? By whom?”

“Not by me, I assure you. The military authorities of the country have been his judges, and condemned him long ago. They only waited for his capture to have the sentence carried out. This disagreeable duty has been intrusted to me, and I cannot disobey without losing my command, and, perhaps, risking my own life. My orders at starting were to bring the prisoners back to Santa Fe. But a messenger has just arrived—an Indian, you may have seen—with a dispatch from the governor, in which he orders their immediate execution. I am commanded to have both of them shot on the moment of receiving it.”

The tale was preposterous enough, and might have seemed to her what it was—a *lie*—but for the knowledge of many like cruel deeds in the history of her native land. Her own and her brother's experience, at least, rendered it not improbable; besides, from within her tent, she had seen the Indian Jose and his mule ride up to the campground, both jaded as if coming from a journey. This

gave plausibility to that part about the bearer of a dispatch, almost confirming it.

“God of my soul!” she cried out, in the anguish of conviction, “can this be true?”

“It is true!”

“Oh! senor, you will not carry out the cruel sentence? It is not an execution—it is an assassination, Colonel Uruga! You will not stain your hands with murder? You will not? You *must* not!”

“I must obey orders.”

“My poor brother! Mercy! Mercy! You can save him? You will?”

“*I will!*”

The emphasis with which these two words were pronounced brought a quick flush of gratefulness over her face, and she made a forward movement, as if to thank him by a pressure of the hand. She might have given it, but for the expression upon his features, that told her the consent had not been fully given, or the speech finished. There was more to come—two other words. They were:

“*Upon conditions!*”

It was a sad check to her bursting gratitude. Conditions! She knew not what they might be. She might have some suspicion. But she knew Gil Uruga, and could tell they would be hard.

“Name them, senor,” she said. “If it be money, I will give it. Though my brother’s property is to be taken

from him—as we’ve heard—not so mine. I have wealth, and will give anything to save dear Valerian’s life.”

“All your wealth would not save him, *senorita*, but that will—that which would cost you nothing—*your hand*.”

“*Senor!*”

“Yes, *senorita*, your hand in holy wedlock. That is all that is asked.”

She started as if a serpent had stung her, for she now comprehended all—even for whom her hand was so strangely solicited—though she mechanically asked this question.

“For one,” he answered, “who loves you with his whole soul—who has loved you for long, hopeless years—ay, *senorita*, ever since you were a schoolgirl, and he a rough, wild youth, the son of a *ranchero*, who dared only gaze upon you from a distance. He is a peasant no longer, but one who has wealth, one upon whom the State has bestowed honor and command, one worthy to choose a wife from among the proudest in the land. *Senorita*, behold him at your feet!”

On saying this, Uraga dropped upon his knees before her and remained awaiting the response.

It did not come. She seemed as if petrified, and deprived of the power of speech. Her silence gave him hope.

“*Senorita*,” he continued, in an appealing tone, as if to strengthen the chances of an affirmative answer, “I will do everything to make you happy—everything a husband

can do. And remember your brother's life. I shall be risking my own to save it. I have just seen him on the subject. He does not object, but, on the contrary, has given his consent. He knows his danger."

"My brother has given his consent?" she exclaimed, with a look of incredulity. "I must have it from his own lips; I must see him."

As she said this she sprang past the kneeling suppliant, and, before he could rise to his feet, or stretch forth an arm to detain her, she had glided out of the tent, and was hastening on to the spot where she supposed the prisoners to have been placed.

With exclamations of anger and chagrin, Uraga went rushing after. His intention was to overtake and bring her back, even if he should have to drag or carry her.

He was too late. Before he could lay hand upon her she had reached the spot where her brother lay bound, flung herself down by his side, and was holding him in her embrace, pressing her lips to his forehead, and moistening his cheek with her tears.

CHAPTER LVI.

THE LAST APPEAL.

A change had taken place in the tableau under the tree. Where late were the two prisoners lying along the earth, with a soldier standing sentry over them, there was now only one, Don Valerian, with his weeping sister upon her knees by his side, and Uruga near by, his brow black and eyes shining like coals of fire.

His first impulse was to call up the lancer, still keeping guard over Don Prospero at a distance, and order him to drag brother and sister apart. His next was to do it himself, and he was on the move to carry out this design when a third thought restrained him.

It was not humanity—there was not a spark of it in his bosom—but a hope suddenly conceived, that now the two were together, he might renew his base proposal with a better chance of having it entertained. He would reiterate his promise and redouble his threats. He did not need to be told that, in the short interval before his coming up, words had passed between brother and sister in low tones, but loud enough for each to be made aware of what had been said to the other. On perceiving that she had got beyond reach, and that there was no chance of preventing

the interview, the pursuer had slackened his pace, and thus they had gained time to exchange thoughts with one another. It needed not much. Each was already more than half prepared for the disclosure the other had to make; and Uraga, about to renew his proposal, could read refusal in the face of both.

It did not daunt, only determined him to a form of menace firmer and more terrible. There was no one near enough to hear what would now be said—no one for whom he cared. The soldier and Don Prospero were far out upon the plain; they might catch the distant murmur of words, but not make out their meaning. What mattered it if they did? The trooper was trustworthy, and if things did not go well, his prisoner was doomed to death, and could not afterward tell tales. If they did go well, he would not, or his silence could be secured.

Roblez was sitting silent in the tent, smoking a cigar, and perhaps listening, but otherwise taking no part in the action of the play. His overhearing did not signify to his associate in many a past crime; and not much account was made of Conchita, who stood at a distance, trembling, afraid to approach under the angry frown of the grand colonel of lancers.

“Don Valerian Miranda,” began Uraga, on recovering his composure, along with his breath, after the chase across the camp-ground, “I suppose your sister has told you what has passed between us? If not, I shall tell you myself.”

“My sister has communicated everything,” was the reply of Miranda, “even the falsehood by which you thought to fortify your vile proposal.”

“Vile proposal you call it!” rejoined the other, upon whose cheek appeared no blush of shame for the deception he had practiced. “Does the offer of saving your life, at risk of my own—rescuing you from a felon’s death—does this deserve the epithet with which you are pleased to qualify it? Come, *Senor Miranda*, you are wringing me, while trifling with your own interests—with your life, as you now know. I have been honest, and declared all. I love the *senorita*, your sister, as you have known long ago. What do I ask you? What is this proposal you have termed vile? Only that she shall become my wife, and by so doing save the life of her brother. As my brother-in-law, it will be my duty, my interest, my pleasure to protect you. I have the power to do so, and you need not fear. The governor owes me a pardon for service rendered—it shall be yours.”

“Never!” exclaimed Miranda, with a swelling fervor that caused a stretching of his cords—“never, on such conditions!”

“Does the *senorita* speak with the same determination?” asked Uraga, fixing his eyes on Adela.

It was a terrible ordeal for a sister. A brother lying bound by her side, his death decreed, his end near, the executioner standing over him—for in this light did Uraga appear—called upon to save him by promising to become

the wife of this man—hideous in her eyes, detested as if he had been a common hangman—and knowing or believing that if she did not, in another hour, perhaps less, she would be gazing upon a blood-stained corpse—the dead body of the only near kin-relative she had on earth—the only dear one except another, whom she now believed to be also in danger.

No wonder she trembled from head to foot, and hesitated to indorse the negative so emphatically pronounced by her brother.

He noticed her indecision, and again spoke, quickly, but firmly as before.

“No, never! Dear Adela, do not think of such a thing. Do not fear or falter, for I shall not. I would rather die a hundred deaths—by garrote or on the rack—than see you the wife of Gil Uruga. Ruffian! how dare you repeat your infamous proposal!”

The man thus rudely defied, hissed out one of the vilest exclamations known to the Spanish tongue, dictated by his roused rage, and then added: “You shall die, then; and after that your sister shall still be my wife, without your seeing it—perhaps something still worse for her and you.”

The fearful meaning conveyed by the last words caused Miranda to raise his body half upright, at the same time giving a wrench to the ropes around his wrists. The sweat, forced from him by the agony of his soul, had already moistened the rawhide thongs to stretching. They yielded to the convulsive effort, leaving his hands free.

With a quick lurch forward, he caught at the sword dangling by Uraga's side. Its hilt was in his hand, and in an instant he had drawn the blade from its scabbard.

Seeing himself thus suddenly disarmed, the lancer colonel retreated, calling loudly for help to Roblez and the sentry that stood over Don Prospero.

Miranda, with his ankles still fast bound, could not follow him. With the sword-blade he hewed the thongs asunder.

But the release came too late. Just as he had got fairly on his feet, the trampling of many hoofs was heard upon the grassy turf, and in another instant the returned lancers, with Roblez and the sentry, were around him.

He stood side by side with Adela, surrounded by a circle of lancers, and behind these were others with cocked carbines.

There was no chance of escape—no alternative but surrender. After that——

He did not stay to reflect. A wild thought flashed across his brain—a terrible determination. To carry it out only needed the consent of his sister.

“Adela,” he said, looking into her eyes for it; “dear Adela, let us die together!”

She saw the sword, resolutely held in his grasp, and that its point was not turned toward the assailants. She understood the appeal.

“Yes, Valerian, yes!” came the quick response, with a look of despairing resignation, followed by the muttered



MIRANDA RAISED THE BLADE, TURNING ITS POINT TOWARD
HIS SISTER.—[page 365.]

speech: "Mother of God, take me to thy bosom! To thee I commit my soul!"

Miranda raised the blade, turning its point toward his sister. In another moment it would have been buried in her bosom, and afterward in his own—a fearful episode.

It was not permitted to transpire, though the soldiers had no hand in hindering it. Dismayed or careless, they sat in their saddles, without thought of interfering. But between their files rushed a form in whose heart was more friendship and humanity.

It was that of a girl—slight, dark-skinned, with light drapery floating behind her. The intruder was Conchita, opportune to an instant.

Another second, and the fratricidal sword would have bereft her of a mistress, and then of a master—both beloved.

Both were saved by her interference—by her grasping the upraised arm and withholding the blade. Roblez, close following, assisted her, as also the dismounted lancer.

Soon the intending sororicide and suicide was disarmed, and once more bound, now more securely than ever; while his intended sister-victim was conducted back to her tent, and placed under the guard of a trooper.

CHAPTER LVII.

THE EXECUTION ORDERED.

Exasperated almost to madness, Uraga re-entered his tent. He felt at the same time chagrin and shame; the first for the failure of his plan, and the last at having been disarmed by a man who was his prisoner. All this in the presence of his followers, for the lancers had come up in time to witness his discomfiture.

And now in his rage he determined to proceed at once to extremities; the last alternative pointed out by Roblez in the disposal of his prisoner, then death. He only summoned his adjutant to the tent, to take counsel with him as to the mode.

“You are resolved upon it?” was the interrogatory of Roblez, who merely put it as a matter of form.

“That is an idle question after what has occurred. He shall die—they shall both die—within the hour!”

“Well, colonel, the thing is not so difficult now. This brisk little bit of an interlude has been all in your favor. It gives pretext and color for their execution by court-martial, even though we two don’t quite constitute a quorum. The men have been witnesses of the mutiny, as we may call it, and won’t now talk of any secret motive

on your part. In fact, our fellows are themselves quite eager to have the business settled in that way. I believe they would have settled it when they first rode up, but for fear of harming the senorita in his arms. The rascals have some gallantry, especially where the lady is good-looking. Now that she's out of their sight, they'll be ready for anything you like, and won't mind a little manslaughter."

"How should we do it?"

"Oh! proceed in the regular legal way. We two shall try the prisoners. We are supposed to be doing it now, and, of course, condemn them to death, make known the sentence to the men, and direct the regular form of military execution, to be shot. I suppose you don't particularly care to have them hanged?"

"No, no; it isn't worth while wasting time. Shooting will do; and I don't want to waste much time about that. We must get back to the Del Norte, where I hope to find one more worthy of my vengeance; so, adjutant, tell the men what we have decreed, and let them be preparing. Send the sergeant here. I shall give him directions myself."

Roblez went off to execute the orders, and soon after a non-commissioned officer appeared at the entrance of the tent.

"Sergeant," said his colonel, stepping out and facing toward the place where the prisoners were once more together under the tree, "there's a little delicate business to be done, and you must assume the direction of it. Our

two prisoners are to be taken no further. We have held court upon them, and they are condemned to be shot. So direct the men to load their carbines and be ready."

The sergeant simply gave a salute of assent.

"Let all of them take part except Galvez, who is to keep guard over the women. Tell him to take care that neither gets out of the tent. Make sure that the flap is pulled down, so that they may not see what's going on. Moreover, make no more stir or noise than may be necessary. Have the men drawn up in line. I shall give the word myself."

"Where are the prisoners to be placed, colonel?"

"Ah! I did not think of that. Let me see."

Again turning his face toward the spot where the victims were lying, unconscious of the cruel destiny that was being prepared for them, though perhaps not unsuspecting it, he ran his eyes along the edge of the wood. In that direction the trees stood thickly, their huge trunks scarcely distinguishable in the gloom, caused by a dense overhanging foliage, as well their own as that of numerous parasites that laced them together, forming an almost impenetrable festooning that struggled down among the tops of the bushes growing underneath.

Advanced a little into the open ground, two trees stood side by side, conspicuously apart from the others. They were cotton-woods of the largest size, their smooth stems having a diameter of several feet, and clear of parasitical climbers.

On these Uraga fixed his eyes, and for a second or two scanned them, as a lumberman would scrutinize a log he intended for the saw-mill.

The examination seemed to satisfy him, and, pointing them out to the sergeant, he said :

“Place one against each of those trees, with his back to the trunk, and facing the open ground. As they’ve been soldiers, we won’t disgrace the cloth by shooting them in the back.”

After a grim smile at his ironical jest, he added :

“Bind them in an upright position which you can do by carrying thongs around the trunk. That done, place your platoon in front here, about ten paces off. When you’ve got your stage ready, come back to the tent and report. I’ll give the cue for the commencement of the play.”

With another flash of demoniac glee, casting a strange lurid light over his countenance, he once more stepped inside his tent, while the sergeant went off to execute the grave orders that had been so flippantly given.

Meanwhile the prisoners were a prey to fearful apprehensions—Don Prospero, perhaps, more than his younger companion—for to Miranda, after the chapter of horrors just passed, death might have lost its terrors, and almost seemed a relief. He would have no longer regarded going out of the world, but for the thought of what might happen to her he must leave unprotected behind him. His saddest regret was that he had not been quicker in

handling that suicidal sword. Another moment, and his sister and himself would have been beyond the reach either of brutality or vengeance. He sighed as he thought of his failure to accomplish that dread, despairing purpose, almost cursing Conchita for her well-meant but what he deemed mistaken humanity. He could envy Collabinus, for Tarquin was still striding around, and there was no Brutus near.

He groaned as he reflected on the picture, not his own, but that of his beloved sister. For himself, he knew it would not be long—at least, not in this world. He had no doubt that his end was nigh.

The prisoners saw signs around them, movements about which there was little mystery. Plainly were they preparations for a military execution; and who but they could be the intended victims?

Had there been any uncertainty, it would have ended when they found themselves dragged away from the spot they had hitherto occupied, and strapped upright against two trees, the lancers, carbine in hand, forming line in their front.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE HAND OF GOD.

The sun was slowly sinking down toward the summits of the Sierra Blanca, his golden beams deepening to a redder tint, as if to be in unison with the tragedy soon to be enacted under their light; for this not only was the scene now set, but the characters already on the stage.

One standing at that crisis on the bluffs that bounded the valley of the Alamo, and looking down upon the spot where Uraga had pitched his camp, would have been struck with the tableau there presented to his view. At a single glance he would have seen two men standing with their backs to a couple of trees, fastened firmly to their trunks with rawhide thongs; in front of them—some ten or twelve paces off—nine men dressed in the garb of Mexican lancers, ranged in single rank, and holding short guns in their hands, the man upon the extreme right showing upon his sleeve the cheverons of a sergeant.

Nearer to the bluff, and close to the edge of the timber encircling the open space, a conical-shaped canvas tent, with two men standing beside it, both in the uniform of officers—that of one of them especially splendid, having on its shoulder-straps the insignia of a colonel; the other but the single bar of a lieutenant.

To the right, and farther along the edge of the wood, a second tent of oval shape, a small marquee, its entrance-flap close shut, with a lancer—long pennoned shaft in hand, and carbine slung across his back—standing sentry in front of it.

Half way between the two tents, a group of animals—three horses and a mule—all four saddled and bridled, slightly attached to the outstretched branches of the trees by a loop of their lariats.

Out upon the open ground, and near to the banks of a tiny rivulet that steals silently across it, another and larger grouping of animals—ten or a dozen horses, with about half the number of mules—the horses also under saddle, though unbridled, and browsing in their trail-ropes.

One other animal form—a human one—completes the tableau. A man of dark bronze complexion, wearing a coarse woolen jacket, tanned sheepskin trousers, palm-plait hat, and rawhide sandals—in short, an Indian peon. He is standing, half crouching, behind the tent in front of which are the officers.

Such was the picture that would have been seen by any one looking down from the bluff above at that moment, when Don Valerian Miranda and his fellow-prisoner were about to suffer death, by the decree of a cruel and unrelenting enemy.

The buzzards saw it from the high, projecting perch where they had all day been resting. It was now near sundown, and still they staid, instead of flying off to their

usual night resting-place. Yet there was no noise or turbulence to tell them of an approaching conflict, with an ensanguined field to follow, strewn with corpses—the sight most grateful to their eyes.

Something of this there had been a short half-hour before, and then they had flapped their sable wings, stretched out their naked, coral-colored necks, and uttered croaks of hopeful anticipation.

The short, exciting scene, with its shouts and angry exclamations, had passed off without giving them a prey. But although complete tranquillity seemed to be restored, they still remained, as if the very silence told them that the storm would return.

It was indeed ominous, when coupled with the movements which the vultures could not avoid observing. Perhaps they comprehended their nature, and could predict the result. Whether or no, they kept their perch upon the rocks, despite the sinking of the sun, whose fast reddening rays lent a lurid tint to their sable plumage.

To those moving about on the plain below the silence was equally solemn and impressive. They knew they were going to deal death to two of their fellow-creatures, and there was not a man among them who did not know that it was a death undeserved.

Pirates and pilferers as they were—robbers in uniform, every one of them—all knew, privates as well as officers, that they were about to commit an atrocious crime. The knowledge, however, did nothing stay them. No throb of

mercy or humanity, no thought of fair play or justice, no fear or reflection about consequences, could restrain such hands as theirs, most of them stained already with blood—the blood of their patriotic fellow-countrymen.

The silence with which every movement was being made was in no way mysterious. It was by direction of Uraga, who had his reasons. Enraged at his late discomfiture and disappointment, ruffian as he was, he might well be contented with the retaliatory step he was about to take. It might have interrupted his gratification to make Adela Miranda a spectator to the execution. Perhaps he would have done so, but that he did not choose to trouble himself with a scene, or anything that might cause delay. He was in haste to be gone from the spot, so that he might elsewhere satisfy a vengeance far more bitterly felt; for that now dooming Valerian Miranda to a felon's death was not by a tenth degree so keenly felt as the black, unquenchable hatred he had for the man who had made the ugly scar on his cheek—a brand that seemed to burn, pursuing him as with the curse of Cain. And now that he knew the man not only to be his victor in the field of war, but his conqueror in the court of love—now that he had hopes of being able to overtake him and obtain revenge—his soul, absorbed with this thought, could brook no delay.

Simply to save time, therefore, he had given orders to his men to make their preparations quickly and in silence.

His commands were obeyed to the letter. They who

received them knew that an act of disobedience would be rewarded by a bullet through the brain.

“Is everything ready, sergeant?” he asked, as the soldier in sleeve chevrons appeared at the entrance of his tent.

“Quite ready,” was the prompt reply; on receiving which the lancer colonel stepped outside the tent, followed by his adjutant, while the sergeant placed himself on the right of the line.

“Attention!” was the command that came from Uraga, delivered in a subdued voice, but loud enough to be audible to the firing party.

“Make ready!”

The carbines came to the “ready.”

“Take aim!”

The guns were briskly brought to the level; their barrels glistened bronze-red under the setting sun, their muzzles pointing to the prisoners. Those who had them in hand but waited for the word “Fire!”

It came not. Before it could pass from the lips of Uraga, his nine lancers lay flat along the grass, their carbines, escaped from their grasp, lying, still loaded, beside them.

It was as if they had been suddenly struck down by a thunderbolt, or the hand of God himself.

CHAPTER LIX.

A RESCUE.

The stroke that had laid Uruga's troopers low, unexpected, and for a moment mysterious, was not a silent one. It was accompanied by a volley of shots, though the cracks were not those of carbines.

It was succeeded by a chorus of cries, almost as savage as those that might issue from the throats of Comanches, along with the swish and crashing of branches, as if a herd of buffaloes were breaking their way through the brushwood.

All these sounds came from the wood, aback of the two trees to which the prisoners were attached. And, for a time, those who sent them could not be seen.

Only for a short interval, counting but seconds. Then issued from out the shadowed obscurity at least two score men—great bearded men, who appeared as giants beside the forms that had fallen victims to their death-dealing shots. Each carried a rifle that, now empty, was held in the left hand, while a bowie-knife, or revolving pistol, was clucked by the right.

The transformation scene of a pantomime could not have been quicker than the change from the tableau we have just depicted. The eye of a critical spectator might

have detected something of a parallelism between the imaginary stage play and the real drama we are recording. The gayly costumed lancers, with their plumes and pennons, their splendidly uniformed chief and his subordinate officer, the steeds in elaborate leather caparison, might have been likened to the gilded and gorgeous display that precedes the transformation, while the sudden invasion of men in rough blanket coats, buckskin hunting-shirts and leggings, would correspond to the scenes of reality coming after it.

No such comparison occupied the mind of Colonel Gil Uraga when he saw the line of men, waiting his command to fire, suddenly drop down upon the grass. Wild anger was his first impression, succeeded by a period of stupefaction.

It was a brief. The ring of the rifles, which he could not mistake for a platoon fire from his own carbines, and the shouts that followed, quickly restored him to comprehension; and, although he knew not who were the enemies—could not even guess at them—he saw that he was surprised.

He saw, too, that the surprise had been complete—that the conflict was over before it had commenced—that resistance would be idle, and that flight was the only chance left to him for keeping his skin whole.

His adjutant perceived this at the same time, as also the lancer who had been left to guard the closed entrance of the marquee; and all three, with but one thought in their

minds—individual safety—rushed toward the group of horses that stood saddled behind the tents.

The trooper, being first up to the spot, had first choice. In a despairing struggle up that ladder that leads between life and death, discipline oft gives way, and the colonel may be kicked down by the corporal. Imbued with this idea, and availing himself of its doctrine, the trooper picked the biggest and best horse of the trio, leaving the other two to his officers.

Uraga, with a curse, sprang upon the back of the mustang mare, leaving Roblez to his own proper mount.

In half a score of seconds all three were spurring in among the trees, and, despite stray bullets whistling past their ears, likely enough to escape.

Two of them did get clear—Uraga and Roblez. The trooper was brought to a stand, or, rather, the horse he was riding, for he himself, before entering the wood, fell headlong among the bushes that skirted it.

It was a pistol-bullet that produced this effect, and he who held the weapon in his hand was the foremost of those who had charged out of the timber.

Almost alongside of him was another man, of much greater size, and showing equal eagerness to press forward.

They were Frank Hamersley and Walt Wilder. The two were several steps in advance, but Captain Haynes, Cully, and others of the rangers were not far behind.

On first breaking out from the bushes the young Kentuckian looked anxiously around, but not as if searching

for an enemy. The expression in his eye was more that of a man suffering from keen apprehension.

Something of a similar kind could be detected in the orbs of the hunter.

An instant after and it was gone, the eyes of both sparkling with a supreme joy. Two female figures, rushing from out the now unguarded tent, were quickly recognized; and in a moment after the arms of the two men were infolded, each around his own, while words and kisses were rapidly exchanged.

All this action, dilatory as its description may seem, did not occupy over sixty seconds. The rifle fusillade that had swept down the firing party, as with the scythe-blade of death, the forward charge of the Texans, the retreat of Uraga and Roblez, the two girls rushing forth from the tent and falling into the arms of their lovers, were like the quick-changing scenes of a dream—a series of transient, fleeting apparitions.

The last was still present before the first had passed out of sight, for, while Hamersley yet held his rescued betrothed in his arms, his eye caught sight of the three retreating horsemen, and recognized the foremost as Gil Uraga.

A host of memories came crowding upon him—the cowardly insult, but half wiped out by the duel at Chihuahua, his despoliation, the death of his faithful employees and companions, whose blood, spilled upon the sandy plain, seemed to cry to him for atonement, the injury done

to a dear friend, that attempted and almost carried out against one still dearer—against her whose white arms were now around his neck—all these injuries coming into his mind, and before his eyes the author of them hastening to make his escape, he could not go unpursued.

Rapidly withdrawing his arms from the tender embrace, Hamersley faced toward the trio of retreating horsemen. He was too late to take aim at the foremost, but a flash of intuitive or instinctive thought told him to fire at the hindmost, who chanced to be the sentry riding off on his own horse.

In another instant the trooper dropped dead among the bushes, while the horse, released from guidance, came trotting in between the tents.

Hamersley, springing toward him, caught hold of the bridle, at the same time whispering a word in his ear that brought back recollections, acknowledged by a loud neigh, and then by an almost continuous whimpering expressive of joy.

“Do not go, Francisco,” exclaimed Adela, as she saw him preparing to spring into the saddle, and divining his intention. “Oh, do not go! Let the wretch escape. He is not worthy of your vengeance.”

“Dearest Adela, it is not vengeance, but justice. I parted from you once before to pursue him. Urged by the same thought, I must go again. Do not stay me. Be assured that this time I shall be more successful. Something tells me it is my destiny to bring to punishment

this detestable criminal—perhaps the greatest on earth. *I must go!*”

“There’s two on ’em, Frank, two ter one agin ye, an’ no anymal for me to go ’long wi’ ye. Thar’s the rangers goin’ for thar cutters, but they won’t get them in time. I’ll jump this ole mule hyar as has been rud by Concheeter, an’ see what I kin do.”

“No, Walt; you stay and take care of Conchita, with my dear Adela. What if there are two of them, or a dozen? See, dearest, your brother is calling for you. Go to him. A kiss. Adieu!”

Suddenly snatching the kiss, and tearing himself away from the arms so reluctant to let him go, he leaped into the saddle, and, in a few bounds of his horse, was lost among the trees.

Walt, making over the charge that had been intrusted to him to one of his old ranger comrades, mounted the mule and rode after; but the disproportion between the small quadruped and its colossal rider made it very improbable he would be in time to render succor to the impetuous Kentuckian.

Soon after, several rangers followed, having caught and bitted the troopers’ horses, their own having been left in the woods too far behind to be available for the chase.

The rest remained upon the ground, spectators of a tender scene between the man who had been so unexpectedly rescued—snatched from the very jaws of death—and the sister, whose noble affection had prompted her to share death with him rather than submit to dishonor.

CHAPTER LX.

THE CHASE.

By the time Hamersley had got his steed fairly astretch, the fugitives were out of sight, though yet only a few hundred yards ahead; for the scenes and speeches recorded had only occupied a few seconds. It was only the screen of the timber that concealed the two men who were retreating from him.

He felt confident of being able to overtake them. He knew his pure-blooded Kentucky hunter was more than a match for any Mexican horse, and could soon come up with the mustang mare and the other. If they should separate, he would of course follow the former.

As he rode on he saw they would not go far apart. There was a sheer precipice on each side—the bluffs that bounded the creek-bottom. These would keep them together, and he would have both to deal with in an encounter.

The ground was such that they could not well escape him, except by superior speed. He could see the cliffs on each side to their bases. There was not enough under-wood for a horseman to hide in. He hastened on, therefore, confident that he still had them before him.

Ten minutes more he was quite sure of it—they were
ir ht.

The timber-tract, through which the chase had hitherto led, abruptly terminated, a long, grassy meadow of over a mile in length lying beyond, and beyond this the trees again obstructed the vista up the valley.

The retreating horsemen had entered upon this meadow-land, but had not gone far over it, when Hamersley spurred his horse out of the trees behind them; and now pursuer and pursued were in full view of each other. It was now a tail-on-end chase, all three horses going at the greatest speed to which their riders could press them.

It was soon evident to all three that the large American horse was rapidly gaining upon the Mexican mustangs, and if no accident should arise, he would soon be on their heels or alongside them.

Hamersley clearly perceived this, and casting a glance ahead, appeared to calculate the distance to where the timber again commenced. To overtake them before they could reach it was the thought that was uppermost in his mind. Once among the tree-trunks, they could go as fast as he, for there the superior fleetness of his horse would not count. Besides, there might be thick underwood to give them a place of concealment.

He must come up with them before they could reach the cover, and to this end he once more pressed his animal, both with spur and speech. At this moment the pursued men, looking behind them, saw that there was but one in chase of them. There was now a long stretch of the open plain in his rear, and no other pursuer

it. Brigand though he was, Roblez was a man of real courage, though his colonel was not. At bottom, Uraga was a coward. Still there were two of them, in full health and strength, both carrying swords, and Roblez a pair of dragoon pistols in his holsters. Those belonging to Uraga were nearer to the hand of Hamersley, having been left in the saddle, which the robber, in his hasty retreat, had been hindered from occupying.

“Courage!” cried Roblez; “there’s but one of them after us. The others have not had time to get mounted, and won’t be up for awhile. It’s some rash fool, who’s got your horse from Galvez. Let’s turn upon him, colonel?”

The coward, thus appealed to, could not protest, and in one instant the two wrenched their horses round, and with blades bared, awaited the approach of the pursuer.

In a dozen more strides of his great horse he was on the ground, and Uraga now recognized him—his antagonist in the Chihuahua duel, the man he hated above all others on earth.

This hate, however, intense as it was, did not at that moment give him any grand courage. In the eye of Hamersley, as he came close, Uraga saw the terrible expression of the avenger. Something whispered to him that his hour was come; and it was with a sinking heart, and an arm half-palsied by despair, that he awaited the encounter.

As already said, the two Mexican officers carried swords

—cavalry sabers—and against these the Kentuckian had no weapon for parry or defense. He was but poorly armed for the unequal combat, having only a bowie-knife, a Colt's revolver with one chamber already emptied, and, as a last resort, the single-barreled dragoon pistol in the holsters.

Quickly perceiving his disadvantage, he checked up his horse before coming too close, and with the revolver took aim at the nearest of his enemies, which was Roblez. The shot told, tumbling the lancer lieutenant out of his saddle, and making more equal the chances of the fight.

But there was no more fight—not the show of it; for Uraga, on seeing his comrade fall, and once more catching sight of that avenging glance, that glared upon him as if direct from the eye of Nemesis, wrenched the mustang around, and rode off in wildest retreat, his sword, held loosely, almost dropping from his grasp.

Soon it did drop; for Hamersley, following in close pursuit, fired a second shot from the revolver. The bullet struck the extended sword-arm, and the naked blade whirled out, and fell with a ring upon the meadow-turf.

Uraga rode on without looking back. He had not even the courage to face toward his enemy. He thought only of getting to the timber, in a despairing hope of there finding concealment.

It was not his destiny to reach it. The avenger was too close upon his heels, the head of his horse swept by the mustang's tail, with its long, white strands spread comet-like behind.

Once more Hamersley's revolver was raised, the muzzle pointed at the spine of the fleeing coward. The pulling of a trigger would have sent the bullet into his back. But it was not pulled. Whether from whim, pity, or some other motive, the pursuer quietly transferred the pistol to his left hand, and then forcing his horse into a long leap forward, he laid hold of the lancer colonel with his right, grasping him by his waist sword-belt, and jerking him out of the saddle, flung him with a violent effort to the earth. Then reining up, with the revolver once more grasped in his right hand, he cried out :

“Lie there, you ruffian, and keep still. I have several shots to spare, and if you attempt to stir, one of them will greet you.”

The admonition was not needed. Uraga, stunned by the fall, for a time made no movement. Before he had come to himself, the rangers had ridden up, with Walt Wilder on the Mexican mule, and made prisoners of the two wounded men, neither having been killed in the encounter.

Better for them if they had ; for they were now in the hands of those who had already doomed them to death. Their fate was inevitable.

CHAPTER LXI.

A NEW MODE OF HANGING.

The sun had not yet gone down, though his rays had assumed a ruddier hue as they lingered over the campground, now stained with human blood. The buzzards still kept their station upon the cliff, nor showed sign of leaving for the night. Now sure of a banquet, they would stay there till morning.

The pursuing party had returned with their prisoners, who lay upon the ground, encircled by the rangers, who seemed to hold consultation.

Hamersley was not among them, or taking any part in their proceedings. He was inside the marquee, with company more congenial. By his side was Adela; Colonel Miranda and the doctor reclining near, but no longer in bonds. Conchita was moving out and in, at intervals communicating with her gigantic lover, who, having business with his old friends, the rangers, could not give her the whole of his time.

The party inside the tent, if not jubilant, were at least happy. Their sudden and unexpected delivery, from what had so late appeared certain death to some of them, could yet scarcely be realized. It was like being suddenly

awakened from some horrid dream, its horrors still hovering around them.

As they continued to converse, exchanging narrations and explanations, the dark shadows gradually dissipated, and their thoughts became restored to their natural channel. Those of the young Kentuckian now coursed in the sweetest of all currents; for upon his breast lay confidently a beautiful head, with a soft arm resting upon his shoulder, while into his eyes gleamed other eyes overflowing with love and gratitude. There was no false modesty or reserve, even in the presence of a brother, since that close proximity had already been sanctioned by his consent, and was now more than ever acceptable.

Inside the tent it was a tableau of love, wreathed with fraternal affection.

Far different was the scene transpiring outside—a picture of passions the very reverse. There a new tragedy was about to be enacted, and the stage was being set for it.

“Well, boys, what are we to do with them? Shoot or hang?”

The interrogatory came from Captain Haynes, of the rangers. It is scarcely necessary to explain its import, or to say that it referred to the two prisoners just captured.

“Hang!” was the response, emphatically spoken by more than a score of voices.

“Shootin’s too good for skunks sech as them,” was the commentary added by the man in the blue blanket-coat.

"They oughter be scalped, an' quartered, too," appended Cully.

"A leetle torter wouldn't do no harm," suggested a still more severe speaker. "Durn 'em, they deserve it."

"No, no," said the ranger captain. "Enough if we string them up. Well, I suppose that's agreed to? You all say hang?"

"Hang!" came the wild word again, issuing simultaneously from every throat and unanimously, not a single voice dissenting.

"Get the traps ready, then," directed Captain Haynes. "You, Cully—you and Walt Wilder look around and see where's the best place."

"Thar's a pick place," suggested Walt; "them air two trees, whar they hed thur victims strapped up for the shootin'. Thar's a branch for both o' 'em, so as they needn't be crowded in makin' tracks torst etarnity. I reck'n them limbs air high enuf. What d'ye say, Nat Cully?"

"Jest the thing," responded Cully; "kedn't be better ef the sheriff o' Pike County, Missouri, had rigged it up for a gallis. Hyar, fellers; look out a kupple o' trail-ropes, an' fetch 'em up."

The trail-ropes were soon forthcoming, and flung over the two limbs that stretched horizontally out from the trees to which Miranda and Don Prospero had lately been lashed. There needed no eye to be formed for the running noose—the iron rings of the lassos furnished these; and in less

than ten minutes everything was ready for carrying Judge Lynch's sentence into execution.

"Who's to haul up?" was the next question asked.

A score of men sprang forward, crying out, with one accord: "I will."

In fact, every man upon the ground seemed willing to take hand in this duty, which, under other circumstances, would have been to most of them not only disagreeable, but disgusting.

The tales they had heard of atrocities committed by the prisoners, the clear evidence of them in their possession, had made a profound impression upon the minds of the rangers, who, although themselves rough men and but little troubled by delicate sensibilities, were nevertheless true to the common instincts of humanity. And these instincts now stirred them to what they looked upon as only a just retribution of crime, with no motive of mere personal revenge. Walt Wilder might have been an exception to this, by recalling the slaughter of his comrades of the caravan, and still more Hamersley. But the latter was inside the tent, taking no part either in the trial or execution. Nor did Miranda or the doctor show any sign of interest in it, notwithstanding the persecution they had suffered from the common enemy. They could not help knowing what was going on without, but they knew also they were not wanted.

"Boys," said Cully, seeing so many volunteers before him, "thar 'pears no stint o' hangmen 'mong ye; but I

reck'n I must disappoint ye all. These Mexikin skunks don't deserve to be hoisted up to etarnity by a free-born citizen o' the Lone Star State. It would be a disgrace to Texin to be the hanger o' either o' 'em."

"What would you do? Somebody must pull them up."

"Tain't needcessary, They can be strung up 'thout air a hand techin' trail-rope."

"How—how?"

"Wal, thar's a way I heern they sometimes use themselves. Jest fotch up them two ole mules wi' the pack-saddles on 'em, an' this chile'll instruk ye how. Ye ken take off the saddles; them ain't needed."

Three or four men hastened to execute the order, and the mules were soon led up and stripped of their saddles.

"Now, conduct hyar the krimnals," was the next command from Cully, who, by general consent, was acting as master of the ceremonies.

The prisoners were brought upon the ground, half-led, half-dragged. Neither spoke a word, or even by look made any appeal for mercy. They knew it would have been idle. There was not a countenance around them but told this, as plainly as if proclaimed in the most emphatic speech. Their uniforms were torn and stained with blood. They looked like a brace of wolves taken in a trap—Roblez like the big American wolf, savage but not yielding; Uraga cowed and trembling like a coyote.

"Mount 'em on the mules!" was the next order from Cully.

It was instantly obeyed, and the two men were set astride of the hybrids.

“Now fix the snares roun’ thar thropples, an’ make the other ends fast to the limbs overhead. Draw ’em jest tight, ’thout stretchin’.”

The directions were carried out, and the criminals were now seated on the mules, each with a noose around his neck, the rope to which it belonged carried taut up to the branches above, and there made fast by several warpings.

“Now, Walt, I reck’n you an’ me kin spring the trap. Air yur pistol loaded?”

“It air.”

“Wal, you take the right-hand critter; I’ll take the left ’un. When I gie the word, let crack—rite inter the anny-mul’s gullet. You know whar.”

“All right, ole hoss.”

There was a short interval of silence, but it was a silence profound—such as always precedes the falling of the drop on the scaffold of the gallows. The chirrup of a tree-cricket or the rustling of a leaf would have been a loud noise at that instant. So ominous was the stillness, the vultures that had once more alighted on the cliff craned out their naked necks, as if to inquire the cause. They started on hearing a voice from below cry out the word “Shoot!” It came like a sharp scream, causing most of them to take wing; the others followed, as they heard two cracks rising from the same direction.

They were pistol-shots that had been fired with fatal

aim. When the smoke cleared off, two mules were seen lying dead upon the ground, and over each the body of a man, with a rope around his neck, swinging to the branch of a tree, a slight tremor in his frame and a convulsive movement of the limbs showing him to be in the last throes of asphyxia—by hanging.

CHAPTER LXII.

WHAT CAME AFTER.

This last act in our drama has been recorded—the last that may be deemed worthy of detail.

After so many episodes of an exciting and sanguinary character, the succeeding tranquil scenes would appear tame, though it may interest the reader to have a brief epitome of them.

Of the characters killed upon the stage, he will not care to know more. They are dead, and cannot be resuscitated, even if deserving it, which none of them do; for, in this tragic tale, Nemesis, in dealing out vengeance and death, allied herself with Justice. The fallen deserved their fate, all but the unfortunate victims of the caravan attack, and the rangers, who had succumbed to Tenawa spears and shafts; but as they, like the supernumeraries of a theater, lived nameless, and died unknown, their death may stir our sympathies without appealing to the depths of sorrow.

The reader, as we have said, may desire to know something of the after history of those who survived, which was not without vicissitudes and chapters of an interesting nature, although not of a character sufficiently exciting to

serve for the pages of a modern romance that rigorously exacts the sensational.

It would scarcely give him a sensation to tell that Colonel Miranda, with his sister, Don Prospero, and the Indian damsel, Conchita, accompanied the young Kentuckian and Walt Wilder in their return across the plains, Captain Haynes and his rangers forming their rough but gallant escort as far as Nacogdoches, over the eastern border of Texas, when Walt Wilder bade a characteristic adieu to his old roving comrades.

And it would be tame to relate how they afterward proceeded on to Natchitoches, and then took steamboat to the mouth of Red River, though to Frank Hamersley and Walt Wilder it might have been very pleasant to reflect that upon one of the remote sources of the same stream each had found what Byron so vainly longed for :

“A desert for a dwelling-place,
With one fair spririt for his minister.”

A marriage scene, or ceremony, will always have a certain interest—especially for the fair sex—but it is rare that this rises to the sensational, except on the isle of Manhattan.

Still, that occurring in a country church, in the “blue-grass” district of Kentucky, where Frank Hamersley stood before the altar, was not without some notable features, fairly deserving of record. That the bluest blood of the blue-grass country assisted at the ceremony is an ordinary chronicle ; but it is not every day that three couples take

Hymen's oath at the same time, which on this occasion there did.

Frank Hamersley made the usual vow to protect his beautiful Adela, while his colossal comrade, Walt Wilder, swore in the same strain as regarded Conchita, and had the clergyman not stopped him, would have added some unique asseverations of his own to strengthen or clinch his promise of fidelity.

The reader, expecting only a double marriage, has been told that it was *triple*, and will be inquiring who were the other two devotees at the hymeneal throne. One was a handsome man, of dark complexion and Spanish features, bearing a marked likeness to the bride of Hamersley; and no wonder, since he was her brother. Nor was it any greater wonder that the tall, fair girl by his side—on whose finger he shortly after slipped a ring—bore an equally striking resemblance to Hamersley himself—being his sister.

Thus had it come about. If the conquest of the Mexican maiden over Hamersley's heart had been quick—almost instantaneous—not less so was that of the Kentucky girl over the affections of Valerian Miranda. On each side there was an equitable retaliation.

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When we again saw these three couples together, it was far away from the blue-grass country of Kentucky, though still within the territory of the United States. They were

standing upon the roof of a splendid mansion that overlooked the town of Albuquerque.

All six seemed as happy, if this could well be, as when arrayed in bridal robes at the altar of the Kentucky church; for Don Valerian Miranda, from his roof, could look over broad leagues—not acres—that were his own now far surer that a star-bespangled flag waved over them instead of that exhibiting the Mexican colors, while Frank Hamersley saw upon the plain below a caravan of wagons, his own, laden with rich goods, no longer in danger of being overtaxed by a despotic governor, or despoiled by prairie freebooters, whether real Indians or counterfeit.

It was, indeed, a happy reunion on the roof of that New Mexican house, and the evening sun, from an unclouded sky, reflected its mellowed light upon cheerful and friendly faces—none more cheerful or friendly than that of Don Prospero, who was one of the number.

The dear old doctor had been rewarded for his devotion both to friendship and freedom. His native land had lost its nationality, a loss the true patriot will never lament, when liberty is the gain. It is only the petty partisan who cares to prop up a despotic independence. Don Prospero was not of this kind. On the contrary, he triumphed in the event that had transferred his native province from the weak pilferers who had hitherto habitually plundered it, to the strong protecting power, whose flag now waved over it.

Without fear of interruption, he could now call upon

Adela—and did—to attune her voice and guitar to that patriotic strain so rudely interrupted in the Lone Ranch.

THE END.

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